

# The career construction interview and literary analysis☆



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine what changes occurred in a career construction interview (CCI), what elements contributed to these changes and how reflexivity was fostered. Two clients and two counselors participated in interpersonal process recall (IPR) interviews (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008) to review CCI interviews they had previously participated in. The CCI was reported based on the construction and reconstruction that took place during the interview. The IPR interviews were analyzed qualitatively by means of the grounded theory method. Then the two CCI's were submitted to literary analysis based on Greimas's narrative semiotics (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2009) in order to determine whether and in what way the counselor missed something during the interview. The article concludes that the CCI is very effective but could be made even more so if the counselors received more training in literary analysis, more specifically narrative semiotics.

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The interview is by far the most important tool in counseling work and as all tools it can be both helpful and unhelpful (Elliott, 1985). A counseling interview can vary by the method used, because of the personality and training of the counselor or in relation to the setting (Gorden, 1987). The following article focuses on the career construction interview (CCI) a method of narrative counseling developed by Savickas (2011, 2013). Its characteristics are to use stories told by the client as “an active attempt at making meaning and shaping the future” (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). The stories or narratives are used to help clients formulate their life-themes and construe future career perspectives (Guichard, 2013). The counselee is seen as an author of autobiographical stories. The counselor encourages the counselee to “reflect on life themes with which to reflexively construct their career” (Savickas, 2015a, p. 140). Two examples of CCI's will be analyzed with the method of interpersonal process recall (IPR) (Elliott, 1986; Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008; Watson & Rennie, 1994), which is a research method to study thought processes during an interview (Larsen et al., 2008).

“Interpersonal process recall (IPR) is a qualitative interview method designed to access client's and caregiver's conscious but often unspoken experiences as they occurred during the interpersonal interaction under investigation.”

[Larsen et al. (2008), p. 32.]

The emphasis in the article is on the changes that occur during a CCI interview, which elements produce the changes and whether reflexivity is fostered in the interview. The results of this examination will be compared to an analysis of the clients' stories based on the narrative semiotics of A. J. Greimas (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2009). This will allow us to determine to what extent the counselor was able to identify the key issues in the material provided to her by the client.

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The first aim of the study is therefore to define the changes that take place in a CCI based on what the participants say about the changes that occur. The changes aimed for in the CCI are a formulation of life-themes and the construction of a future life perspective. The second aim of the study is to see which elements bring about change and how reflexivity of the client and his thinking about the life-themes and career problems were fostered during the interviews. By reflexivity we mean a “process of dialogic interpretation of the self” in which people “put into action their capacity to create and to define new perspectives when faced with transition situations.” This process “implies the development of self-reflexivity and a reflexivity on one's past, present, and anticipated future experiences” (Bangali, Masdonati, Fournier, & Goyer, 2015, p. 23). The three research questions are therefore: 1. Did a change occur in the counselee as a result of the interview? 2. What brought about that change? 3. Was reflexivity fostered by the interview?

Coming from a background of literary studies as well as counseling, the authors have paid particular attention to how the CCI is based on an interpretation of the stories provided by clients, the role-models they identify and the language they use. Many of the skills required by this method rely on the practice and theory of literary analysis. In order to work effectively, counselors have to be familiar with cultural references known to counselees, and how they play out in relation to stories and representations. They must also be aware of the mechanisms of story-telling, the basic structure of narrative and theories of identification with fictional characters, among other things. To help clients achieve a new awareness and understanding of their situations and prospects, counselors must be able to analyze clients' narratives and the language used to convey them. Counselors then use this understanding to help clients reconstruct a macro-narrative that makes sense to them.

In the following pages, the method employed will be described in greater detail: the CCI with two clients as well as the four IPR interviews with both clients and counselors.

Finally a critical reading of the two CCI sessions will be proposed informed by the IPR interview. This reading will build on an analysis of the clients' stories based on the narrative semiotics of A.J. Greimas (1966, 1987), in order to show how effective a tool it is for narrative counseling.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

The participants were two 1st year students at a University of 13 thousand students and two career counselors. The students were approached by the University Counseling Services and asked to participate in the research. Each student came twice, first to a counseling interview based on the career construction interview method, and then to an Interpersonal process recall interview. The counselors also came to an IPR interview and talked about their experiences during the counseling session. Both counselors had been trained in conducting career construction interviews; one counselor had no experience in CCI interviews apart from the training. The other had previously conducted six CCI interviews.

### 1.2. Procedure

The two one-hour career construction interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The counseling interviews were video-recorded and later viewed by a researcher and client less than 48 h later. The client was asked to describe underlying thoughts and feelings (Larsen et al., 2008) during the intervention and reflect on events in an interpersonal recall interview (IPR). Another researcher spoke with the counselor in the same way. The four IPRs were used to access clients' and counselor's experiences as soon as possible after the interaction took place (Larsen et al., 2008). The four IPR interviews were transcribed and the actions and processes described were analyzed with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and coded into themes (helpful and unhelpful events) and categories (factors that led to career changes). The two researchers met both counselors and counselees for sessions that lasted 60 to 90 min.

### 1.3. Career construction interview

This method is a narrative approach in career counseling based on five questions that have worked best in Savickas's long experience using a protracted trial-and-error method (Savickas, 2011). The five questions (see Table 1) are chosen because they are a gateway to understanding different aspects of the life story, such as self-concept or script (Savickas, 2011). The material for building narrative identity in the counseling work are the stories that come up: “Stories serve as the construction tools for

**Table 1**  
Career construction interview questions.

Story focus		Client activity
SCENE	Opening Question: How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?	Act
SELF	1. Who did you admire when you were growing up? List three heroes/role-models.	Actor
STAGE	2. What attracts you to your favorite magazines or television shows?	Agent
SCRIPT	3. What is your favorite book/movie? Tell me the story.	Author
REHEARSAL	4. Tell me your favorite saying or motto?	Advice
BACK-STORY	5. What is your earliest recollection?	Arc

building narrative identity and highlighting career themes in complex social interactions.” (Savickas, 2011, p. 38). The questions asked are: Opening Question: How can I be useful to you as you construct your career? (1) Who did you admire when you were growing up? (2) What attracts you to your favorite magazines or television shows? (3) What is your favorite book/movie? Tell me the story. (4) Tell me your favorite saying or motto? (5) What is your earliest recollection?

The five questions are shown in Table 1. The column on the left describe different perspectives of the life portrait and the column on the right describes different actions where the client is contributing to his story.

The objective of the opening question is to hear the exact wording of the client when he or she presents the problem. The five questions that follow reveal the client's major life-themes. The first question gives information on the self-concept, without being too direct (Guichard, 2013; Savickas, 2011). The premise is that persons admire qualities in others that they possess themselves. The second question gives information about the client's interests and preferred environments. The answer to the third question gives the counselor information about a potential script that a client envisions for the next life chapter. This is a story that will 'hold' him or her and make them feel safe in their choices. People are often drawn to a particular story from a book or movie with a plot that resembles their own dilemma and advances their own story (Savickas, 2011). The fourth question informs about the advice the person gives to her/himself. The fifth question is both intimate and complex. The counselor asks for three recollections from childhood when the client was around 6 to 10 years of age. The reason for focusing on early childhood is that these stories were formed during a time when people define what the world is like and how to fit into it (Taber, Hartung, Briddick, Briddick, & Rehfuess, 2011). The earliest recollections (ER) are seen as nuclear scenes in the client's life and the most personal aspects of the CCI that deal with an issue at hand, something that preoccupies the client. “Early recollections (ERs) help counselors understand the world in which a client lives and the ways in which the client deals with that world” (Savickas, 2015b, p. 35). They also suggest the perspective which clients take on their current problem.

All the questions ask about issues that are close to the heart of the client and that she/he loves to talk about. Instead of asking for a whole life story, many small stories are told that are subsequently reconstructed into one large story. On the basis of these stories the counselor and client build a portrait that tie together the little stories to form a larger macro-narrative (Savickas, 2011).

#### 1.4. Interpersonal process recall interviews

The transcripts of the IPR interviews were coded into three categories: (1) changes in the interview, (2) elements that led to changes and (3) exchanges fostering reflexivity. Each of the three categories had sub-categories: (1) Change in the interview: clarifying goals, change perspectives, meaning-making, formulation of life-themes, and construction of a future life perspective. (2) Elements that led to changes: value clarification, self-exploration, relief to talk about problem, encouraging talking about strengths, counselor is encouraging, empathy of counselor, helpfulness of counselor, role-models as solutions, early recollections linked with current experience. (3) Exchanges fostering reflexivity have three subcategories: atmosphere, important incidents and reflecting on personal situation.

#### 1.5. Narrative semiotics

The approach to narrative developed by A. J. Greimas (1917–1992) has been presented in the context of career and educational counseling by Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2009).

On the one hand, Greimas's 'actantial model' provides a structure for all narratives, allowing to classify the different actors within the story into three sets of two actants: subject/object, help/opposition, and sender/receiver. On the other hand, Greimas's 'semiotic square' offers a tool to explore the semantic world of the narrative and its links to concepts and ideas that are relevant to the story-teller and the intended audience (Greimas, 1966, 1987; Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2009). The material provided by the client is woven into a macro-narrative which is also informed by the client's comments during the IPR interviews.

## 2. Results

Results from six interviews are presented as follows. First the construction and reconstruction phases of the CCI are presented as a case-study, followed by a description of the themes from the IPR interviews. This same process is repeated in the second case-study.

#### 2.1. Case 1: career construction interview: Indiana.

Indiana is a 20 year old student who failed the entrance exam in medical studies last year. She decided to study biology in case she wants to retry the entrance exam. She also told herself that maybe she would become interested in biology, but that has not happened. She finds herself a bit lost in many of the courses. She does not feel any ambition to study biology and thinks that her lack of motivation might be due to her not being on the right track. She has made good friends in the biology department. When the counselor asks Indiana how she can be useful to her, she answers by saying she realizes that although she is hoping the counselor can tell her where to go, that is not the way things are. “Nevertheless I am hoping that you can help me in finding a pathway. To pinpoint the possibilities.” Indiana says she was not very diligent in her high school studies (although she finished school a year ahead of her age group) and the only idea she came up with after graduation was to go to medical school. Of all the

possibilities she could think of this was the only one. She says when asked that she really didn't have a burning interest in medicine, but she could very well see herself working as a physician. She feels that other possibilities are open, such as sign language teacher, but she does not want to become a teacher or a tourist guide, even though she would like to study languages.

When asked about her role-models she mentions Professor Carter the archeologist, who found the tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun. "He was a doer." Another role-model is the hero Eragon of the book by the same name; someone who had at least two father images. Eragon made mistakes because he had a quick temper, but he was able to control it and overcome his mistakes.

He is also someone who wants to live alone, but he faces the fact that he must make decisions. Sometimes he faces two bad options and therefore he doesn't want to take a decision, but he has to. When he has made a decision he really starts to do big things. He is allowed to grow and become someone big.

Indiána's uncle Jon is her third role-model. He is very clever and always knows what he wants. He can also be a bit of a prankster. During this section of the interview Indiana connects herself with her role-models, especially to Eragon, who like herself was a shy little child, and like her he can be undecided, bad-tempered and make mistakes. Indiana says she is stubborn like her uncle.

When asked about her favorite magazines, etc. Indiana says she reads comic books and fan-fiction stories on the internet. She is not writing any fan-fiction stories herself. She says she read an article by Richard Dawkins, who is a biologist and atheist. When asked about favorite stories, she mentions as her all-time favorite movie *The Lord of the Rings*, and her favorite story *Eragon*. What she finds fascinating in the *Lord of the Rings* are the different worlds described, different races, languages and ways of living.

I like stories by authors such as Tolkien and C. S. Lewis because they put much more into the story than just something they have imagined.

She responds to the fourth question by telling the counselor that her favorite saying is: "If you wait to do something good, you end up doing nothing." She explains by saying:

If you see someone who needs help, just go and help him or her. Or don't postpone tasks until later. Do them now.

Her earliest recollections are: (1) the birth of her baby brother when she was 2 years old; (2) finding a worm and wanting it to be her pet, but it died; (3) falling off a bicycle and hurting herself just after the training wheels had been taken off.

### 2.1.1. Reconstruction

In responding to CCI questions, Indiana is revealing how she thinks about or constructs her career. The counselor considered first that Indiana said that she was curious to see her baby brother. The counselor also wonders if there is a parallel between knowing that you have to make a decision after high school and knowing that a baby brother will be born. The counselor links this with the fact that Indiana is preoccupied with her indecision and now she is facing the task of choosing one path. The second story was titled *Disappointment* because the worm died (dried up in the sun). The counselor asks Indiana whether it was a disappointment to fail at the medical study entrance exam. She says that the disappointment is in having to go somewhere else where she doesn't quite fit. The title of the third story is *My pride was hurt*. Here the counselor encourages Indiana: failing at the exam was a set-back, but she continued, just as she continued riding her bike after her fall. Indiana says that the message of the story is that it does not help to cry. Indiana decides to carry on and as her favorite saying says; she should move on and do something good. By the end of the interview other possible occupational choices are mentioned, such as archeology, history and sociology. Indiana is not interested in occupations with low salaries and she finds the humanistic studies mentioned at the end not demanding enough. Her role-models, Eragon and her uncle are both people that make mistakes and Eragon has difficulties making decisions. Indiana recognized during the interview that she was connecting with characters that resemble her. Eragon overcame his difficulties and Professor Carter knows how to solve problems, but for the moment many more possible paths are turning up (Table 2).

### 2.2. Case 2: career construction interview: Thelma.

Thelma is 20 and started engineering in the fall. After five weeks she quit because she didn't see engineering as something she wanted to do in the future. She was in a shock over her decision for almost three weeks and has barely discussed it with her parents. She has not talked about it to anyone, except her boyfriend. She also says that though mathematics had been her favorite

**Table 2**  
Indiana's CCI.

SCENE	Failed Medical Entrance Test. Biology not sure.
SELF	Professor Carter. Eragon. Uncle Jon.
STAGE	Comic books. Fan-fiction.
SCRIPT	<i>Lord of the Rings</i> . Works of CS Lewis. <i>Eragon</i> .
REHEARSAL	Don't postpone doing something good.
BACK-STORY	Birth of baby brother. Pet worm shrivels up. Falling on bike.

subject in high school, she found that studying math all day was not exciting. She had wanted to study geology but thought that job opportunities were better for engineers. Another reason for choosing engineering was that her father works in an engineering office as an administrator and she likes the atmosphere. After quitting engineering, she decided to get a job at the swimming pool where her mother works. She has been saving to buy a flat some day with her boyfriend. They now live with her parents and three siblings. At the end of the interview Thelma tells the counselor that she is dyslexic. Her father helped her during her high school years by reading everything for her.

When the counselor asks her: “How can I be useful to you?” Thelma has some difficulty in answering. After a few attempts, she says that she is hesitating. Should she switch to geology or computer science, or work at the swimming pool and save money. She is also considering becoming a firefighter. She likes the physical aspect of that job.

Thelma has been very busy all her life. When she was younger she would go to school, do homework, practice piano and do gymnastics until she went home to bed. When asked about role-models, she replies that they were girls who were champions in gymnastics, both nationally and internationally, but also her grandfather who was a fire-fighter as well as her “really cool” cousin who is five years older than she is. Thelma trained in gymnastics from an early age and she was soon so good that she trained with much older girls. The gymnastics hall was a few minutes away from her home. She looked up to these girls because they could endure everything and were ambitious and really good at what they were doing.

My grandfather is a genius, everyone in the neighborhood knows him and he is so caring. We lived in my grandparents' house when I was really young, and I followed him everywhere. My cousin is very clever and does everything a 100%. I worked with her at a summer camp for disabled children and she would study each individual case before they came and was therefore very well prepared when each group of kids arriving to the camp.

When asked about magazines she says she just picks up gossip from newspapers and magazines, as well as on the Internet. She never had time to watch television, but is starting to watch shows like *Vampire Diaries* or *Orange is the New Black* with her boyfriend. Geology and mathematics were her favorite subjects in school. Her favorite book is a detective story that takes place in the region up north which she finds the most beautiful place in the world. Her grandfather was raised on a farm up there, and the family has a summer house close to the farm. “It is my dream place,” Thelma says. Her grandfather has told her many stories from his youth and she says she would have liked to have lived there at the time.

Asked about her favorite movie, she has to reflect for a moment and then says that it is *The Life of Pi*. She finds the colors so beautiful in the film and the environment.

They are moving their zoo very far and the boat sinks in a big storm. Pi is the only survivor with a few animals. All the animals die, except for the tiger. It is incredible, but this possibly could happen.

Her favorite saying is: Go on, go on which is something she used to tell herself when she was training. Her earliest recollections are: 1) Being a three year old in Austria in pouring rain. She thought she would drown and was shocked. 2) When she was 4 or 5 years old she went to the swimming pool with her grandfather nearly every day, and she remembers in particular the time she went alone to the ladies changing room for the first time. 3). The third recollection Thelma mentions is starting gymnastics at the age of six. She loved going there by herself and doing the exercises by herself. 4) Thelma has two recollections of hamsters. The first one she lost completely somewhere outside for a whole day and found him again. The resurrection of her second hamster is something she remembers experiencing with her grandfather. The hamster had been dead for a day, or so they thought. They buried him in the garden and said a prayer. At that point they heard a lot of noise from the hamster's grave and they dug it up: it was still very much alive (Table 3).

### 2.2.1. Reconstruction

In responding to CCI questions Thelma is revealing how she envisions her career at this point. Her vocational situation is described by the first ER which is about being shocked because she thought she would drown in the pouring rain. She uses this same phrase of being in shock when quitting her studies at the engineering school. She has never been in a situation like this and feels she has lost control. When discussing the ER with the counselor, Thelma reflects on her tight schedule in high school and gymnastics. She thought it would be much the same in engineering, but it wasn't. Now that she has left university, she feels safe working at the swimming-pool where she used to go with her grandfather. “I am now in the role of the woman that helps little girls to cope with dressing themselves in the women's cabin.” The counselor reminds her that she feels secure in the work place where she had so many good times with her late grandfather and where her mother works. She is also caring for others who need her help. A third recollection was starting her training in gymnastics at the age of six. She absolutely enjoyed

**Table 3**  
Thelma's CCI.

SCENE	Quit engineering. In shock. Doesn't know what to do next.
SELF	Gym girls. Grandfather. Clever cousin.
STAGE	Gossip magazines. Vampire Diaries.
SCRIPT	Detective story in familiar setting. Stories grandfather's childhood. Life of Pi.
REHEARSAL	Go on, go on!
BACK-STORY	Caught in rain. The changing room. Beginning gym. Hamster resurrection.



it. An important expression she uses is “doing things by herself”: she feels independent in gymnastics. The counselor says that her ambition and diligence in gymnastics is also her strength. The fourth recollection is about a hamster that was lost and found. Another hamster resurrected after burying him in the garden. The hamster gave signs from the ground that it hadn't died after all. It is obvious that she is realizing that she will find her way. Although she quit her studies, life will continue.

Another theme the counselor discussed with Thelma was her favorite movie, *Life of Pi*. He went on a voyage in beautiful but threatening surroundings. Pi was separated from his family, which resonates with Thelma, as she wants to stand on her own feet, whether it will be in the studies of her choice (geology/natural sciences) or by earning a salary and starting a home of her own. At the end of the counseling session, she is still hesitating, but says that it has been a relief to talk this over with someone. After she quit engineering, her parents wanted her to choose immediately some other program and start attending classes. This was stressful, but since she started working they have not discussed this. The counselor reminded her that this was her life, in the same sense as Pi had his own life.

The macro-narrative is about a young woman who has had a protected learning environment because of her dyslexia, but now needs to set sail on her own. Through the discussion with the counselor Thelma discovers that she values beautiful landscapes, both in the *Life of Pi* and up north in the region of her grandfather. It is interesting that when asked about her favorite book she mentions a detective novel that takes place in the region that to her is the most beautiful place on earth. The counselor chose to have her talk about the region, instead of the detective novel. Her family has a summer house there where she spent many summers with her grandfather. One of her occupational preferences is to become a fire-fighter like he was. Other role-models she has are young women that excel at what they are doing and put a lot of work into it. Thelma realizes that she has many of the strengths of her role-models, and that reassures her. She sees by working with the counselor on the early recollections that she was in a state of shock when she quit her engineering studies, but everything will turn out fine. Her strengths will guide her towards her career goal.

### 2.3. Changes in the interpersonal process recall interviews.

In the IPR's changes that took place during the interview were identified by Indíana and her counselor Helen, as well as by Thelma and her counselor Gabriela. They are presented here, followed by what brought about these changes and how counselors and clients felt that reflexivity had been fostered during the CCI.

#### 2.3.1. Change in the interview

**2.3.1.1. Indíana.** Indíana clarifies goals, especially when she is talking about her role-models. Eragon and the uncle have in common with her to be successful in what they are doing in spite of mistakes. “They have the courage to take a step forwards”, she says and through the role-models she changes perspectives as they remind her of significant people who have solved problems that are similar to hers despite their mistakes. “It was good to get this off my chest. And telling the stories, thinking about past events gives you a new perspective, really...”

Indíana starts to address her hidden pain of failing at the medical entrance exam when commenting on the counselor's reconstruction of her early recollection of falling of a bike.

You know, there is a limit to how much time you can spend crying about something. This is the state of mind I have been trying to have. You just continue, but it has been really hard. This was quite a good interpretation by the counselor.

Nevertheless, when asked, Indíana is not prepared to say that not succeeding at the medical entrance exam was a failure; she just didn't prepare herself well enough. Here are crystallized two of Indíana's life themes: being successful in life and learning from mistakes.

Helen perceives incongruence in her client who said she doesn't care very much about her studies or have much ambition, when they were talking about the fact that she hadn't prepared a lot for the medical entry exam. This is very unusual for students that take these entrance exams. Through the CCI interview Helen identifies changes in the client. She observes how quick the client is to relate different stories of her life to her current situation.

**2.3.1.2. Thelma.** Thelma affirms that the CCI interview helped her change perspectives, especially the fact that she now talks about her strengths, her diligence, her intelligence, the memory of her grandfather. “I really like talking about him and the things we did together.” Thelma says in the IPR interview that the reconstruction of the early memories made a lot of sense to her and her life. “That was real fun and it worked”. She also says that the counselor's interpretation of her early recollections “totally made sense and I have never thought about my experience of quitting my studies in this way”. She realized that she had been in shock, but that with her strengths she will overcome her difficulties. “She described the rain and referred to my feelings after I had quit, I was so confused at that point, but then things started to work out.” When talking about the theme of strengths Thelma says:

At first I thought that my role-models are so much better than I am, and then I thought that you really try to be like your role-model. You know, I think that most people would feel stronger when hearing that they are like their role-models.

Thelma tells the researcher that the CCI method helped her in clarifying her goals, it really helped her with assessing her position. Thelma formulates future life-themes in the IPR interview by saying that the counselor and she had been talking about her

strengths in natural sciences. Two life-themes are crystallized in what she says: her many strengths and her search for independence.

Gabriela says that more than one change took place in the CCI interview with Thelma. She changed perspectives from focusing on weaknesses in mathematics to realizing her many strengths in that subject and others. The ER's give meaning to her current experience; from problem to solution. She starts formulating life-themes with beautiful landscapes and people that love nature. She is also reassured that her decisions are hers to take and that like Pi, she is travelling away from home. Thelma is still afraid of choosing an option her parents might disapprove, but she knows by the end of the interview that the decision is hers to take. "This is a story about departing from your parents" says Gabriela. Thelma became increasingly enthusiastic about her future choices as the interview unfolded.

### 2.3.2. Elements that led to change

**2.3.2.1. Indíana.** Indíana explores herself through the role-model questions and early recollections. She finds the questions very good, because "you talk about interesting things that turn out to be linked with the problem you are dealing with now". Without being prompted, Indíana realizes that she "admired Eragon for overcoming the difficulties of taking a decision".

A characteristic of the CCI interview between Indíana and Helen are the many possible career options mentioned. Many other options had come up in conversations with family members. When reflecting upon this exchange in the IPR interview Indíana describes herself as a "mellow human being" and as a cloud "because there is no use in getting upset about things". In the IPR interview Indíana talks about the difference between recreational activities for entertainment, like reading books or singing in a choir, and things she is really interested in for her career. Indíana reflects:

Somehow I have never explored myself, and the questions on role-models and early recollections helped me to dig into myself. I have never known how to do that. You know, my mother she says that I do not have a very clear picture of who I am. This is why it is difficult for me to choose when I need to choose a career path for myself.

Indíana says that it is good to talk with the counselor "I didn't feel like I was talking with the wall and that she was really listening." She describes talking with someone else about her indecision as "taking the cap of the bottle". She also finds it reassuring to talk with Helen about her procrastination problem.

**2.3.2.2. Thelma.** Relief in talking about her problem with someone for the first time, apart from her boyfriend, is a helping element. "My parents completely stopped talking about this after I quit my engineering studies." When discussing her session she said that speaking about the problem was very helpful and that the counselor was encouraging. "I felt so much better, after I started to talk with her about this." Thelma finds the counselor very helpful in being persistent about the opening question. It took a while for Thelma to understand that question. "Am I supposed to tell her how she can help me!" is what she was thinking when Gabriela, the counselor kept asking her how she could be useful to her. Gradually she understood that by telling her story the counselor could be helpful. She enjoyed answering the five questions. She even found the questions energizing, as she is talking about things that make her happy. In particular, she enjoys talking about her grandfather and the area where he grew up. It is her favorite spot in the world. In connection with this and her appreciation of the beautiful sceneries of nature in the movie *Life of Pi*, Thelma clarifies her values.

I hadn't thought about it but when I think about my grandfather and the setting of this book then I am talking about all the things I find important in life.

Many elements lead to changes in the interview according to Gabriela. Thelma clarified her values of independence and beautiful landscapes. She is relieved when she realizes that she is speaking for the first time about issues that have been troubling her. She is encouraged to talk about her strengths and gradually relaxes in her interaction with the counselor. The grandfather who was always proud of Thelma, is most certainly a part of the solution.

### 2.3.3. Fostering reflexivity

**2.3.3.1. Indíana.** The important incident of failing the entrance exam into medical school is avoided and the situation at hand is addressed by bringing up other possible career options, although Indíana says: "this experience really made me think", adding that she now knows that you can learn from mistakes.

Helen reflects often on her own insecurity in interpreting the micro-narratives and that the client had even taken the lead. "She [the client] was analyzing herself" Helen says. "I realized afterwards when I was making notes about the interview that there were threads in there I hadn't used."

**2.3.3.2. Thelma.** Thelma reflects on her situation like that of her deciding her future for herself. This is something new for her and she is still thinking whether she 'owes' it to her parents to go to school. An important incident in this interview is that it took a long time for Thelma to understand that she was supposed to answer how the counselor could be useful to her. Gabriela says:

It was as if she did not know what she was doing there in the beginning, and I kept asking her how I could be useful, how my expertise and experience could be of use. This was a bit awkward, but gradually we got to an agreement and I realized how important this question is in an interview as it opens up many possibilities instead of limiting the exchange to the solution to a specific problem.

### 3. Analysis

The three research questions will organize the analysis of the two CCI's as well as of the IPR interviews which followed. We begin by identifying a change that occurred in one or both of the interviews, either a change that was recognized by the client, by the counselor, or by the authors. Then we examine what might have brought about this change and whether and how reflexivity may have been fostered and developed. In a final section, we will discuss how a greater awareness in the counselor of the resources of literary analysis, in this case the narrative semiotics of A.J. Greimas (1966, 1987), can allow her/him to extract more useful information out of the material given by the counselee, and make the CCI session more effective.

Despite the brevity of an only one-hour intervention, both clients experienced change. Though they are still far from having made a plan for the future, they nevertheless have opened up a path towards a solution, are reflecting on themselves in relation to their choice of an education, and have found new energy to tackle the task of choosing a career-path.

The first change was experienced and identified by both clients. Previously, they had felt themselves to be blocked in an in-between situation: in Indiana's case, a course of study which was a second choice and of which she was uncertain; in Thelma's having taken the decision to quit a course of study which did not suit her without knowing exactly where to go from there. The simple fact of sitting down with someone to talk was in itself a relief and the first step towards getting out of this situation. This is a change that would be common to most methods of counseling. However, the CCI method has the advantage of avoiding the abruptness and anxiety of the question of a future career and offering instead an exercise which is a bit like a game, inherently pleasurable but which also involves recalling enjoyable moments. Replacing anxiety with pleasure is a good way to foster reflexivity as it turns the difficult task of making a choice into a pleasant and exciting process.

The second change identified in both clients was an increased awareness and interest in the continuity of their selves, not only in time, but also between different aspects not previously perceived as being connected. Indiana is very interested in the links between early recollections, role-models and mottoes with her present situation. This can be seen in an exchange between her and the counselor, Helen, who has been asking her what her favorite fictional character, Eragon, wants for himself. One of the important elements in Indiana's answer is that Eragon has arrived at a point where he must make a choice between two alternatives of which neither is an ideal one, even though he would prefer to be left alone. As a result of Helen's question, she recognizes that Eragon is similar to her, both in his attitudes and the situation in which she finds herself at the present time. Through the fictional character, she is defining herself and her situation. In this way she achieves increased reflexivity.

Thelma realizes the interconnectedness of different aspects of herself and the situation she finds herself in. This can be seen in her discussion with the researcher one day after the CCI. While viewing the interview together, the researcher asks her about the counselor's attempt to connect distinct aspects of her experience, values and tastes to her present situation, having decided to end her studies abruptly. Thelma expresses amazement that this was possible but acknowledges that it makes sense.

This increased awareness in both clients is a direct result of the CCI as making these connections is an essential aspect of its method. Reflexivity is fostered and enhanced by bringing in different aspects of the self (childhood, tastes, role-models, etc.). This holistic approach to the awareness of self is desirable in order to choose a career-path. Both clients experienced a better ability to focus on the task ahead. Indiana was made aware of new possibilities, while Thelma's faith in her ability to decide for herself was reinforced.

The third change was especially apparent in the case of Thelma. The CCI interview has given her a new energy to address the task of choosing a course of studies and later a career-path. The early recollections show that she is very active and capable, proud of her achievements as a gymnast. After her decision to quit engineering studies, which she describes as having come as a shock to her, she has found the energy and the self-confidence to accept her own decision. This energy and self-confidence come from the opportunity given to her to delve into both her past and role-models. Her grandfather is an important role-model as is her older female cousin. Both are capable and happy people. Thelma knows she can be like them and this gives her the strength to take responsibility for her decision and to find a path that will satisfy her. As for Indiana, it is uncertain whether the CCI session has given her new energy. She is ready to explore different possibilities for herself but it is possible that the effects on her self-esteem of her failure to get into medical school have not been fully addressed, as will be discussed in more detail below.

The fourth change identified in both counselees was that they have been made aware that they can take control of their lives. Indiana will continue to explore different paths of study and relies on her family and friends to discuss her future possibilities with her. In a more subtle way, Thelma is realizing that she has already taken control by leaving engineering, that she is in charge of her own destiny and that she has all the resources she needs to lead a successful life. In both cases, this change can be seen as a consequence of the three others: starting to discuss the problem, increased self-awareness and energy, all of these make taking control of one's life more attainable.

The method of the career construction interview allows the counselor to gather a considerable amount of narrative material from the client which they use together to co-construct a narrative of self-realization for the counselee. This material is by definition quite rich and demands that the counselor be capable of identifying the salient points that will enable her/him to help the client to build a useful narrative for herself. Practitioners of the CCI often prefer to meet the client several times, though one hour-



sessions also exist as in the two cases studied here. Whatever the total length of the intervention, we will argue here that counselors can become more effective if they become better aware of the interpretive potential of the stories told to him by his counselee, through the use of Greimassian narrative semiotics.

The two counselors in the cases studied here did not have the same experience in using the CCI method, nor were they equally aware of the interpretive possibilities opened up by narrative semiotics. We will now examine how the stories of Thelma and Indíana might have been explored in greater detail by using a Greimassian approach.

Greimas's actantial model proposes to see every character in a narrative as one of six actants (Greimas, 1966). These actants are subdivided into three pairs. The subject and object are the first of these. The subject is he, she or that which acts in the narrative, whereas the object is he, she or that which the subject is trying to conjoin herself with or, eventually disjoin herself from. An example of this can be found in the fairy-tale about Cinderella. She wants to go to the ball her step-sisters are going to, so that she has a chance of meeting the prince. Cinderella is the subject and the prince is the object. Subject and object are conjoined in this case, whereas in other stories, the subject might want to disjoin itself from something, for example, in a story where the subject is a murderer and is trying to get rid of a corpse. Whether the subject wants to conjoin or disjoin, its relationship with the object is one of desire. That is why Greimas (1966, 1987) says of the pair subject–object that it is placed on an axis of desire.

The next two actants are helpers and opponents. They help or obstruct the subject in its quest for the object. They signify therefore an axis of power, since they either empower or disempower the subject. In the case of Cinderella, the fairy godmother is the obvious helper, whereas the stepmother is the main opponent.

A third and final pair of actants are what Greimas (1966, 1987) calls the sender and receiver. The sender is the element which requests that the subject set out on its quest, whereas the receiver is he, she or that which benefits from it, or has to bear its consequences. In the case of Cinderella, one could say that the sender is the king who decides to hold a ball in order for the prince to find a bride. The receiver is the whole kingdom since its future ruler now has a wife. The axis of the sender and receiver is one of knowledge or transmission (Greimas, 1987; Scholes, 1974). The actantial model is therefore a way of formalizing the structure (or set of relations) of the story, each of its characters having a place within this structure.

We will consider all of the stories told and characters presented by the two counselees as one macro-narrative and attempt to fit it into the actantial model before exploring some of its semantic aspects using the semiotic square. In both cases, the counselee is obviously the subject and her object is to find a course of study and a career-path that suits her. In both cases, an event has created an obstacle between them and this object. In Thelma's case, it is her decision to quit engineering, in Indíana's her failure to succeed in the entrance exam to medical school. Both identify helping agents, for example the counselor who provides them with an opportunity to discuss a problem that had largely been left untouched. In Indíana's case, the help available is in addition her group of friends, as well as her brother and mother, but also her own ability to explore different options. The opposition she identifies is her tendency to procrastinate and lack of motivation. There is possibly another opposition element that remains largely unidentified in the interview, as will be seen later.

Thelma sees help in her role-models, i.e. her clever cousin and wonderful grandfather, as well as her boy-friend, but also there is a strong demand for independence in all she says about herself and a faith in her ability to stay in control and help herself. The opposition is her dyslexia, but she has already come to terms with it by choosing studies and later a career where this won't be an obstacle. The other opposition is the shock she felt after taking the decision to quit engineering.

In both cases, the sender is the need they both feel to choose a course of study and a career-path. Both their families want them to, with more urgency in Thelma's case, but they have both interiorized the need to have a career based on university studies. The receiver, in both cases is a happier and more realized self. At the end of Thelma's interview, this self seems more readily attainable than in Indíana's case.

For reasons that may have to do with Gabriela's greater experience in using the CCI method and her awareness of Greimassian narrative semiotics, the interview with Thelma seems to lead to more satisfying results than the one with Indíana. Of course, this can also be explained by the difference between the two individuals and their respective situations. It is however possible that Helen may have missed an opportunity to explore a problem that barely appeared on the surface in the interview with Indíana, but was nevertheless suggested by the material she provided. The use of Greimas's semiotic square (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2009) could help explain this.

In order to understand what narratives are about, i.e. what the story-teller and the intended audience are communicating about, Greimas devised a two-step method. The first one is to identify what he called 'isotopies', which are semantic elements that repeat themselves with insistence in the narrative. The second step is to determine how these recurring semantic elements are logically related to each other. This is where the so-called semiotic square comes in. By working on the isotopies, one can determine a basic opposition between them which is played out in the narrative. The narrative is about going from one of the opposing terms to another. This entails that there must also be a passage through their contraries, i.e. each of the two opposing terms will also have their contrary or negation which will be present in the narrative (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2009).

If we begin by Thelma's story, the first recurring semantic element that comes to the reader's attention is that of water. Thelma's first recollection is of being terrified in a downpour of rain in Austria. The word she uses to describe her feelings is 'shock', which is the same word with which she described her state of mind after quitting engineering. Water is also the safe place of the swimming pool, where her grandfather went every day, where her mother works and she has now found work herself after leaving school. It is a place where she gains independence, guided in this by her grandfather who allowed her to go alone into the women's locker room, but nevertheless kept certain that she was safe. Water is also that which separates her from her grandfather's birth-place, her 'favorite place in the world' where she has spent happy times with her family. Water is

finally that of the great Pacific Ocean, where Pi has to fend for himself, finding a way to control his life without his parents, while preserving himself from the dangers of the stormy sea and the tiger aboard the lifeboat.

Thelma is able to navigate dangerous waters by herself, like Pi. This fits also well with her long training in gymnastics which is all about taking calculated risks. Like Pi, she can leave home, just like she was able to go to the women's changing room by herself, knowing her grandfather would intervene if necessary. She does not need to have her parents with her. In control and independent, she can sail back over the sea to the land of happy experiences with her extended family (Fig. 1).

The opposing terms of Thelma's story are therefore that of staying in her family home or gaining independence by saving money to buy a flat but also choosing her own course of study and career path. In order to do that she must take a risk, face a sort of danger, but by becoming independent, she also has the ability to be in control and manage the risks she is taking. This will eventually allow her to construct herself as an independent part of her extended family. Thelma's session can therefore be interpreted as being successful as it reinforces her faith in herself to make a decision that will keep her both safe and in control, even while taking measured risks.

Indiána's session does not seem as productive. She is even more confused about what she wants to do with her life. A major isotopy may have escaped the counselor, i.e. that of the hospital environment and its links to medicine and the profession of doctor. Indiána's first recollection is when she goes to see her newborn brother at the hospital at the age of two. She recalls a feeling of curiosity, but also of well-being since she was given candy by her aunt.

Her second early recollection is about her pet worm dying in her care. This is semantically related to hospitals and medicine, since it is about keeping a living thing alive. This recollection also has the semantic element of failure as does the third early recollection which is about falling off her bike and hurting herself. Indiána's stories connect on the one hand curiosity about what is inside the hospital and the desire to take care of another living being, and on the other hand an experience of failure and hurt. Both during the CCI intervention but also during the IPR interview, Indiána recognizes, when asked by the counselor and researcher, that failing the entrance exam to medical school was a shock. However, during the CCI it is only to a limited extent connected by the counselor to other aspects of the material given by Indiána.

Her first role-model is Professor Carter whose curiosity lead him to do great things, in finding Tutankhamun's tomb, while the other archaeologists failed at the expense of their lives. Her second role-model is the fictional character Erogan, who, as Indiána says, is allowed to grow and become something big, even though he makes mistakes and is impulsive. He accomplishes what he has decided to do, like her uncle who is also a role-model. The uncle is also very stubborn, which Indiána describes as a family trait. Her role-models are all people who have succeeded in doing great things while she failed the entrance exam to medical school.

Even though this failure is identified as a major setback, both in the CCI and IPR interview, neither the counselor nor Indiána want to address further the trauma that it may have been for her. It is tempting to relate this to what she says about herself in the third early recollection of her falling off her bike. She is fighting her tears and does not want the people surrounding her to see that she is in pain. She is ashamed of having fallen. The way she tells this story at the time of the interview is indicative of a crisis in her sense of self-worth after her failure. This correlates with other signs of negative self-esteem in the material she gives to the counselor, for example her feeling that she is prone to procrastination while her motto, not to wait to do something good, is in total opposition to the behavior she attributes to herself. Other negative thoughts about herself are that she is a slow learner, that she is "like a cloud" and the judgement she ascribes to her mother of "not knowing who she is".

As can be seen from the semiotic square based on Indiána's story, the basic opposition in her story at this moment in her life is between her ambition to excel, apparent in her choice of role-models, and a less ambitious course. The failure, i.e. the contrary to being successful in attaining high goals, has led to her present situation of being in an unsatisfying study program. The path indicated to her at the end of the interview, i.e. to explore other options is one possibility for her at this point in her story. However, this means overlooking her familial heritage of determination. Though the option can be made to fit with her role-models who all achieve great things, since great goals can be achieved outside of medicine, it nevertheless does not take into account the pain and lowering of self-esteem the failure seems to have brought about. It seems that it would fit better with Indiána's personality and allow her to retrieve her sense of self-worth, if she were to make a second attempt at being accepted into medical school. A counselor more sensitive to important recurring semantic elements in her story and aware of how they relate to each other would probably have encouraged her to explore that option better (Fig. 2).

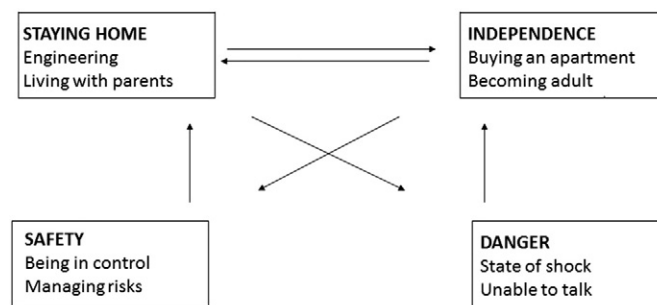


Fig. 1. Thelma's story.

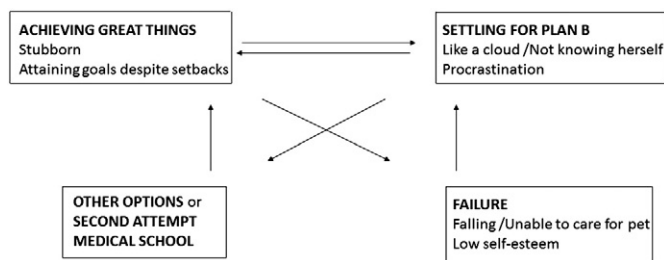


Fig. 2. Indiana's story.

#### 4. Discussion

The conclusion of this inquiry is therefore that all three of our research questions have been answered positively. Nevertheless, these positive answers need to be qualified. The two case-studies show that using the CCI method does bring forth change in the counselee and that it is brought about by the intrinsic characteristics of the method itself. Reflexivity has been fostered in both counselee's. However, it would seem that one-hour sessions tend to be too short for the counselor to extract all the relevant information from the narrative material provided by the counselee. This is even more apparent when the counselor has comparatively little experience in using CCI. Familiarity with narrative semiotics is finally shown to be a good tool for the counselor in his efforts to help his client construct a meaningful story out of the varied and rich material the client has given to him. It is especially useful in helping the counselor discover what the client is telling him without necessarily being conscious of it.

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