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Reflexivity in life design interventions: Comments on life and career design dialogues

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ABSTRACT

Papers published in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life Design Interventions show that narrative innovation develops from a focus on structuring the past to increased engagement in projecting some future prospects. Counselees are energized by the interventions: They become more self-determining. All operations involved in the interventions (basically: telling someone about different life elements identified by the person as important because they are emotionally invested) allows a passage from emotion to cognition (or more precisely: a passage from a felt - emotional - temporal continuity to an expressed temporal continuity), which determines a meaning of life for the concerned person (or a meaning of a fraction of his/her life). The dialogic interactions at work in counseling interventions appear to be the fundamental factor that fostered reflexivity and led to these changes: the situation of dialogical counseling - because of its specific characteristics - stimulates the use of cognitive processes of interpretation, which appear to be the key factor determining the changes.

These comments on the papers published in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life Design Interventions are organized into three parts. The first one expresses some general considerations on the relevance of Life Design Interventions in the context of the challenges that the world must now face. The second part comprises three subparts that summarize the responses that the different studies have brought to each of the three questions that were asked to contributors to this special issue (What changed during these interventions? Which elements determine these changes? How was reflexivity fostered and developed?). And the last section highlights the differences between the methodologies used in these studies and offers some ideas for further research.

1. Relevance of life design interventions in the context of the challenges that the world must now face

All the articles in this Symposium describe and analyze counseling interventions aimed at helping counselees to design their lives. These studies were conducted in different countries from Africa, America, and Europe. The interventions took place with very different people: high school and college students, active laborers, job seekers, people close to retirement, men, women, etc. These pieces of research join many others on similar topics, published in recent years, in various scientific journals or in books. This strong development of this kind of intervention shows that it fits the question that concern people who live in contemporary societies which are called post-modern. Two fundamental characteristics of these societies require that people living in them must, more than in other kinds of societies, decide for themselves the direction to give their lives. On the one hand, they are

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"societies of individuals" (Elias, 1991): societies in which individuals are thought to be responsible of directing their lives (unlike other societies in which such responsibility is attributed to some collectives - family, community, clan, etc. - of which each individual is seen as a member only). Moreover, these post-modern societies are described as "liquid" (Bauman, 2000): it means that people find in them, less than in solid societies, some stable landmarks (as established ideological systems, a single religion, a lifestyle seen as "normal", etc.) that provide them with a solid ideological framework for giving meaning and direction to their lives.

It is to help people cope with such an individual responsibility that counseling interventions for life design were conceived. Differently from our domain's previous interventions of vocational guidance and career development, which revolved around the notion of paid work, the life design approach asserts that the essential element to be considered is the meaning that individuals seek to give to their lives. This change of perspective can be seen as the equivalent in our field at the turn of the 21st century of the Copernican revolution in the 16th century's cosmology. Indeed, both vocational guidance and career development tended to consider that paid work was the core of the counseling interventions (in the same way as the Ptolemaic system assumed that the earth was the center of the universe). Differently, life design considers that the construction of life meaning needs to be the core of the counseling interventions (in the same way as Copernicus' thought that perspective should be heliocentric). This doesn't imply that life design disregards work. On the contrary! It asserts that work - because of the kind of activities it involves, of its products and of the types of exchanges it implies - plays a key role in the construction of our world, of humankind and of each worker's self. Along with Henri Bergson (1911), life design considers human beings as "Homo faber", as beings who manufacture their world and themselves in manufacturing things. Thus, for the life design approaches, work activity is a key element in the people's construction of life meaning. But, for these same approaches, work designates a much broader phenomenon than paid jobs. It includes all types of product exchanges (ranging from those that give the producers recognition only – as is the case with creators of art pieces that are perceived as such in their communities but don't find buyers – to paid employments, and to reciprocal gift-giving exchanges in traditional societies, etc.). Work thus refers to jobs, to craftsmanship, self-entrepreneurship, local systems of trade, domestic activities, etc.

This renovated conception of work, promoted by the life design approaches, allows for an adaptation of career interventions to the major stakes of the contemporary world. Indeed, most of the interventions of vocational guidance or of career counseling or education, designed during the 20th century, focused on access to the current occupational functions and, especially, to paid employment. These interventions were designed to prepare clients to become ideal candidates for occupational selections that included them in the current world of work, a world in which the concerns of decent and human working activities and of a sustainable human development were by no means a priority. But, as the title of UNITED NATION 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (which was unanimously voted during the General Assembly on September 25, 2015) asserts, our fundamental purpose - as human species - must now be of "Transforming our World". And as this Agenda posits, among the transformations that must be done, is the promotion of sustainable development via decent work for all. The Life design interventions allow for the introduction of such reflections on decent work and sustainable development when people construct future perspectives that give their lives meaning. Indeed when people – individually or by the means of collective reflections - design their lives, they are able to consider questions of the following type: through which kinds of decent work activities – that contribute to sustainable development of a planet of 10 billion inhabitants – can I (can we) design my (our) life (lives)? And because of the impending world crises that are at the basis of this UN Agenda, people will probably do it more and more often.

The innovation represented by the life design considerations was also made possible because from the last third of the 20th century forward, the perspectives from which human and social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, specialist of semiology, etc.) considered that human subjects have changed. Four major changes can be underlined. First, human subjectivities are now seen as less unified than previously. Human subjects are now described as "plural" (Cooper & Rowan (eds.), 1999; Lahire, 2010), as speaking with different voices (Gergen, 2011), as combining different "I" positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), as made of a collection of various self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986), as composed of different "subjective identity forms" (Guichard, 2005; Guichard, 2009), etc. Second, these new approaches to "plural" human subjects describe them as searching to give their lives unity, coherence and meaning. They do so notably through the elicitation of certain life themes (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979) and the construction of life stories or auto-biographies (Delory-Momberger, 2009; Ricoeur, 1992) around some plots, which give meaning, from a certain future perspective, to a certain selection of their past and present life events. Third, behaviors are seen as less immediately determined by the individuals' early or past experiences than was the case before. Differently, these new looks on the human subjects insist on the importance of the meaning constructing processes (Malrieu, 2003), of (re)interpretations and symbolizations (Wiley, 1994), of dialogues (Jacques, 1991) and of the various modes of relating to the self and to one's experiences (Foucault, 2010), etc., in the determining of human self-conceptions and behaviors. As a consequence, fourth, human actors are now conceived as endowed with a greater (at least potential) agency than before (Bandura, 2006). Such a potential agency is one of the common presuppositions of the papers published in this Symposium on the Process of Narrative Career Counseling. And, as we shall see now, one of the major outcomes on the Life Design Interventions implemented for this research is a fostering of such a personal agency.

2. Summary of responses provided by these different studies to the three questions that were asked to contributors

The goal of the present research was to answer the three following questions:
What changed during the life design interventions?
Which elements determine these changes?
How was reflexivity fostered and developed?

The following paragraphs summarize and comment on the main responses to each of these questions by the different studies published in this Symposium.

2.1. What changed during these interventions?

The common fundamental change described in each article is that during the interventions counselees began to express various elements of their lives (experiences, events, situations, etc.) and to connect them by giving them a more general meaning. These connected elements often stemmed from different life domains. They have also been experienced at different times of the person's life: the connection was based on the production of a timeline giving meaning to the life elements stated by the person. By using the metaphor borrowed by Mark Savickas from narratology, we can say that all counselees created during these interventions – at least partially – a "character arc" based on these selected life elements.

In some cases, this "character arc" defined a certain future "I", of which achievement was perceived by counselees as giving meaning to their live. For example, one of them saw herself in the future being "the manager of her own crèche." The important point here is that this future "I" was an expectation of achieving something in life, which extends into the future the "character arc" created by temporally arranging a series of past and present events selected by the counselee, in giving these elements a meaning from this perspective. A contribution (Cardoso & al) summarizes this point this way: "Narrative innovation develops from a focus on structuring the past to increased engagement in projecting the future career plans".

All the articles described a similar process: these meaning construction's processes are grounded in the construction of a kind of autobiography or at least a part of an autobiography. Clients constructed these narrations about their own lives on the basis of the associations and connections they made during the interventions (sometimes in between two meetings when interventions progress during a certain time) between various experiences or events of their lives, and more often between past events or past experiences and other ones: present or less remote in time. It is as if the associations and connections between a (or some) past "I" (I used to do "that", I experienced "that", I sensed "that", etc.) and a (or some) present (or less remote in time) "I" (I currently do this, I experience "this", I sense "this", etc.; "this", which I now immediately perceive as having such a common meaning with these past "that") led to the construction of a personally meaningful time perspective, and of a future expected "I" who gives a common meaning to these different past and present "I". This construction of a personally meaningful time perspective, by establishing a connection (based for example on the similarity of felt emotions or on other processes of sense construction) between various life events or experiences appears as one of the fundamental key results, common to these different pieces of research.

The second key result is that (in all cases: either when the counselees produce a partial "character arc" only or when they outline a future "I", in the achievement of which they commit themselves), counselees appeared energized by the intervention: after the intervention, all of them felt that they must do something about their own life. A contributor (Maree) noted, for example: "They become more self-determining".

2.2. Which elements determine these changes?

A key element determining these changes appears to have been telling someone about the life elements that counselees identified as significant. In reporting these life elements, counselees experienced emotions that led them to relive the event or the experience they narrate. As noted by one of the authors (Maree): "These emotions returned while she was telling that stories". Thus, the (re)experienced emotion during narration is what leads the counselee, firstly, to consider a life element as meaningful, and, secondly, to embed it in a temporal continuity: "I have experienced that at that time and I feel this – analogous to that – when I now narrate it: the continuity of my affects is the foundation that determines the continuity of my life". As written by two contributors (Lengelle & Meijer): "Emotions are the fulcrum of identity development" (We find here then one of the points, common to the analysis of the self, by James (1890) and Peirce (1934), (see Colapietro, 1989).

The oldest life elements appear to be those that determine the most intense emotions: those that play a major role in building the timeline by which people give meaning to their lives (or to a fraction of their lives only). In some cases (but not always), these old emotions were painful and harken counselees back to feelings of shame or of doubt about their own abilities. In these cases, the person's construction of his/her significant timeline was supported by an underlying query (of which the counselee was not always fully aware): How to make something positive from these negative affects?

Often, counselees mentioned role models (they are asked to do it systematically in the case of Mark Savickas CCI). These role models were the subject of emotional investments giving rise to the expression of emotions that counselees connected with their other emotions by producing stories that make the role model, "their" own role model, that is to say in endowing it with meaning within the storying of their own emotional continuities (this process, complementary to identification and prevents to make it a pure fusion with the role, was described by Tap, 1980, under the name of "identization").

One of the characteristics of emotions was that they were hard to express: people had trouble putting them into adequate words. To address this difficulty, counselees often use metaphors. Two contributors (Lengelle & Meijer) described different types of metaphors allowing people to express these emotions. Notably they observed a particular type of metaphor – "Thread metaphors" – that interconnected the expressed emotions. For example, a counselee said that her different emotions gave her the impression that "she flies."

The use of these metaphors, and more generally all operations involved in the intervention (basically: telling someone about different life elements identified by the person as important because they are emotionally invested) allowed a passage from

emotion to cognition (or more precisely: a passage from a felt temporal continuity to an expressed temporal continuity, which determined a meaning of life for the concerned person (or a meaning of a fraction of his/her life). Jacques Pouyaud (see Guichard & Pouyaud, 2015) has described this triple process of identifying emotionally significant elements of life, of interpreting them into words, and of inscribing into a timeline that gives meaning to the person's life, in using the metaphor of the movie maker who films different shots, selects some of them and combine them into a sequence for forming the film's storyline. In this metaphor, an isolated shot is as a felt image or emotion, whereas the edited movie is a narration arranging the elements into a certain plot that that makes sense.

2.3. How was reflexivity fostered and developed?

The dialogic interactions at work in counseling interventions appeared to be the fundamental factor that fostered reflexivity and led to changes summarized in the previous paragraph. The role of these dialogic interactions can be described, on one hand, from the perspective of the specific characteristics of the situation of dialogical counseling, and on the other, from the perspective of the cognitive processes fostered in such a situation.

Counseling interventions are very specific dialogic situations because (as written in the Pouyaud et al. contribution) of one of their characteristics highlighted by the "*Primum relationis*" thesis of Francis Jacques (1991). According to this thesis, the dialogical relationship comes first. The relationship sets up the person of a counselee (who seeks to cope with an issue) and the person of a counselor (who has no other major determination than that of being there to help the client, even though counselors necessarily display some characteristics as gender, color of skin, social image, etc., that can impinge on what is said during the dialogue). As a consequence, such a dialogical relationship gives to counselees the opportunity to think outside the box of their daily-life dialogues, which are stifled by the story of the two participants' relationship (e.g.: as in a dialogue between spouses). Therefore the dialogical relationship created by the counseling situation stimulates the production – in the counselee's mind – of these new meanings that make sense of some of the experiences said during such a dialogue.

If this works this way, it seems that it is because of the cognitive processes that the dialogical relationship stimulates. These processes take the form of a double dialogue of the counselee: with the counselor and in the same time with him/herself. According to specialists of pragmatics of conversation (e.g.: Charles S. Peirce or Francis Jacques), when a person thinks about a problem, he/she conducts a dialogue with him/herself in which (occupying the position of "I") he/she says something to him/herself (and because of that, he/she hears what "I" told from the perspective of "you") and he/she answers – from this perspective of "you" – something to "I" ("I" who hears/understands what was answered by "you" from the "I" perspective), and so on. Here, the important point in this functioning is that it highlights a gap between what "I" said and what "you" hears/understands about what "I" said: "you" necessarily understands the "I" statements in some specific respects. Therefore, a constant questioning of "I" about what "you" has understood is developing: Did "you" heard/understood perfectly well what "I" wanted to fundamentally express? This type of cognitive functioning is exacerbated during counseling dialogical relations. Indeed, in such a situation, counselee is led to enunciate his/her words in wondering about what does the counselor – this person created by the dialogical relationship – hear/understand about what he/she (as "I") said. In other words: the "you" in the counselee's mind refers primarily to the counselor. But, because of the "neutral" position of the counselor created by the counseling relationship, the counselee's constant inquiry about what "you" hears/understand lead the counselee to evoking other "you" at the same time in his/her mind: other people from his/her circles who have actually responded something or who might respond something when they have heard or might hear what the counselee just said, and ultimately lead the counselee to wonder (as "you") about what him/herself (as "you") can hear/understand from what he/she said (as "I").

This counselee's permanent state of inquiring about the meaning of their statements concerning the various life elements they consider important leads them to produce about each of them a succession of interpretations, some of which have a family resemblance with those produced about other significant life elements. Paul Veyne, a French specialist on Ancient Rome, described in his autobiographic memories, a cognitive process - "setting up a series" - used by specialists for deciphering the ancient Greek inscriptions, a process that resembles the one used during life and career design interventions. He wrote: "When in an inscription, a fact or word remains obscure, we must search into the mass of other inscriptions, all its other occurrences: with the setting up of such a series, the obscure fact or word reappears again and again in different contexts, and thereby allows for its deciphering at the crossing of this diversity. Is it not by connecting in series that children decipher our world as the days go by?" (Veyne, 2014, p. 145). The resemblance of interpretations of life elements (which usually have a strong emotional charge: a charge, which by nature is difficult to express in words, as pointed out above) is the fundamental process that determines the construction of the storyline by which counselees give meaning to their lives (or a part of their lives) from the perspective of certain point that extends this line into the future.

Counselors play a very active role in the development of counselees' reflexivity. Although this is rarely mentioned in the articles composing this Symposium, it is clear that counselors have implemented combinations of non-structured or semi-structured interviewing techniques for stimulating the counselees to express their statements, interpret them and compare their various understanding of these statements. These techniques include general questions, reflecting on or echoing clients' words, requests for clarification, rephrasing, and syntheses, specific questions.

An article (Pouyaud et al.) highlights an important point: the "Interpersonal Process Recall" (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008) technique, used in these studies with a view of describing the processes involved in the life design interventions, can play an important role in the development of the counselees' reflexivity on their own lives. This technique involves asking counselees (sometimes asking counselors) to select extracts they consider important in their interviews (which had been previously

video-taped). Then dialogues ensue between the counselee and the counselor (and/or the researcher) about each selected excerpts: Why it is important? What has happened then? Which emotions were revived? Which interpretations did they lead to? Etc. From the perspective of the pragmatics of conversation, the important point in these exchanges between counselees and their interlocutors is that this technique establishes between them a type "I - you" dialogue about a "he/she" (the recorded excerpt of the interview, that is to say about some past statements of "I″).

Thus a meta-interview is created: a process, of which studies (see especially Kridis, 2008) have showed the key role it plays in the development of the people statements about themselves by declarations of *commitment*, of *distancing* and of *appropriation* of their taped past speech-acts. A point must be added: such dialogic interactions "I - you", about statements by "he/she", don't take place during meta-interviews only. Such kinds of dialogic interactions are also involved in "regular" counseling dialogues, which comprise some sequences that might also be named meta-interviews and lead to the three kinds on declarations mentioned above. Pouyaud et al. observe that the more the IPR process takes place a shorter time after the interview, the more it produces these phenomenon that Pouyaud et al. have summarized by using the expression "consolidation of intentions". They wrote: "The longer the duration is, the less self-confrontation will be effective as a counseling dialogue. In other words, delayed self-confrontation might be a better tool for analyzing changes afterwards, as continuous self-confrontation should be a form of thinking that is linked more with the counseling process".

3. Differences between the methodologies used in these studies and issues for further research

The observations common to the various articles that have been summarized in the above paragraphs addressed findings from interventions and studies that differ from one another. Four main types of differences can be observed. These observations open the way to new avenues of research.

The first difference relates to methods used in the interventions. Most studies used the Career Construction Interview designed by Mark Savickas (Savickas, 2011; Savickas & Hartung, 2012). Some referred to other methodologies, including the Life and Career Design Dialogues of Jean Guichard. An intervention relied on written productions while all others were mainly based on dialogues. Research may be developed in view of comparing the advantages and disadvantages of these different counseling methods. Given their previously mentioned similarities, such a research might result in a method synthesizing what appear to be the strengths of each of the counseling methods used in these various studies.

Second, the methods used in the interventions differed in their operating modes. Almost all of them were face-to-face counseling interviews. One article, however, described a working group. Although being an isolated example in this Symposium, such a group intervention is not unique as evidenced by the work of Di Fabio and Maree (2012). The use of approaches involving the development by persons, in working group, of stories about their selves appears to be one avenue worth exploring. Such group work may nevertheless pose difficult problems in so far as some intimate experiences, which are essential in the construction of future prospects, may seem unutterable to the person in a group setting. Therefore the question arises on how to design interventions that combine the advantages of group work with the difficulties that such approaches can raise.

Third, in the case of the face-to-face counseling interviews reported in this Symposium, the role of counselors differs. In the case of the CCI, it is the counselors who offer the counselees an interpretative summary of their answers to a small number of very carefully constructed (and arranged in a clever order) questions. To produce this synthesis, counselors refer to the counselees' responses in the reverse order in which these questions have been asked (starting from the last asked ones, which are about the counselees' oldest memories). To perform this synthesis, counselors rely on the words, expressions or phrases that are repeated in the counselees' utterances. The recurring ways of saying of the counselees are thus seen as manifesting their expectations about their futures, as they stem from the stories they were asked to construct for responding questions. Other interventions - including the Life and Career Design Dialogues - attribute to the counselors a facilitating role only: counselees have to determines the fields and life experiences they deem meaningful, they have then to analyze them by themselves (being supported by questions of the counselors who use in addition all techniques of semi-structured interviews), and they have finally to make by themselves the associations and connections between some of these experiences or events that allow them to construct the future perspectives that give meaning to their lives. In these interventions, the role of counselors varies according to the counselees: In some cases, counselors are not more than interlocutors, to whom counselees address the comparisons, associations, connections, and reasoning that they make by themselves, as if they were alone and were expecting from the counselors, only a validation of their own discoveries. With other counselees, the counselors' role is much more active: counselors must support the counselees' thinking and ask them questions relevant for triggering the emergence of these associations and connections that are the building blocks for construction the future prospects that give meaning to their present lives.

A fourth difference concerns the respective weight assigned to the present and past in the construction of these life stories. All studies agree to consider that some themes were revealed during these interventions. But some of them seem to consider that the life theme was already there, stemming from old experiences in the individual's life, and that the intervention reveals this theme only, in actualizing it in the context of the current situation of the individual. Differently, other studies suggest that this theme may be produced on the occasion of the connection of old experiences or events, with other ones, either closer in time or present ones. In other words, in another situation or another time in a person's life, the same old experiences or events - or other past events or experiences that would have become relevant in this new present context - might lead to the construction of a different life theme. In this second case, individual subjectivity is considered as more malleable and more dependent on the current situation than in the first one, according to which old experiences or events draw an arc defining a character's lifelong continuity.

Deciding between these two conceptions is beyond the possibilities of the current Symposium. Only some longitudinal studies of the life developments of an adequate sample of people might provide some answers.

In conclusion, I compliment the authors of the Symposium articles for their important contributions to the study of career counseling. I hope many other researchers follow their leading studying career counseling processes.

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