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Life Design Counseling: A study on client's operations for meaning construction

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the adequacy of the micro-theory of client operations to explain meaning construction during Life Design Counseling. Four adolescents were interviewed about their second counseling session. Their recollections were stimulated through the replay of counseling videotapes. The resulting transcribed interviews were qualitatively analyzed. Results confirmed a sequence of client operations evolving from the symbolic representation of experience and reflexive self-examination towards making new realizations and revisioning self. Moreover, clients reported negative and positive session moments evidencing that clients' attention and activity during the session was not restricted to meaning construction operations. Practical implications for life design counseling are derived from the results and discussed.

1. Introduction

Life Design Counseling (LDC; Savickas, 2011a) is grounded in a conception of human functioning as a continuous process of self-organization which allows ordering experiences and future anticipation (Savickas, 2013). This process, occurring through meaning construction, is fundamental to individual development and adaptation (Watson & Greenberg, 2006). In its use, the narrative symbolization of experience is one of the processes by which self-organization is made possible.

To support an individual's meaning construction for career construction, LDC evolves throughout three counseling sessions. In the first, the counselor uses a semi-structured interview, the Career Construction Interview (CCI; Savickas, 2015), to evoke micro-narratives of the client's life story. The focused topics are: (1) role models for self-construction; (2) magazines, television shows, or websites for manifest interests, (3) a favorite story from a book or movie which establishes the script for the next episode; (4) common-sense sayings or life mottos for self-advice; and (5) early recollections to provide a perspective on the present problem or transition.

In session two, the aim is to help the client in the construction of a narrative that provides coherence to micro-narratives referred to in the previous session. In that sense, the counselor helps clients in elaborating the core problem of his or her

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life, identifying needs and promoting their attainment by formulating goals. Awareness of this core theme is fundamental because it allows the construction of a narrative, in which past, present and future are continuously and coherently connected and integrated (Savickas, 2011a). Finally, in the third session, the focus is on the establishment of links between life themes and career plans.

Throughout the counseling sessions a co-construction relationship between the counselor and the client is fundamental to achieve meaning construction. This context is facilitative of various processes: analysis of clients' subjective experience of their career micro-narratives; exploration of emergent representations; and construction of an identity story with continuity and coherence. All these are aimed at helping clients in planning new possibilities of self-construction in different career roles (Savickas, 2015).

1.1. LDC and meaning construction

To better explain how clients symbolize narratively their experiences in LDC, Savickas (2015) proposed that initially, clients should develop symbolic representations of experience through attempts at articulating micro-narratives. The subsequent reflection on these experiences is needed in order to understand its origins and their congruence with current needs, interests, and goals. In the third stage, the client elaborates on new realizations allowing the development of macro-narratives of experience and new intentions. Finally, clients revise the self by formulating alternative ways of being and seeing which are expressed, for example, through the construction of new career plans.

This sequence of client operations for meaning construction was originally developed in the framework of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT; Greenberg, Rice, & Elliot, 1993). The therapeutic task of systematic evocative unfolding was analyzed to understand clients' operations in solving their own reactions that they feel are puzzling or too extreme (Watson & Rennie, 1994). In this therapeutic task, clients are requested to focus on their emotional experience and, therefore, their first operations are a symbolic representation of experience and reflexive self-examination. These operations allow the articulation and the description of their internal and external experiences as well as the reflection on these experiences, respectively. Client operations evolve into making new realizations and revisioning self, corresponding to higher-level operations that allow a more global self-understanding and the emergence of alternate ways of being and acting (see Watson & Rennie, 1994 and Greenberg et al., 1993 for a detailed description of clients' operations and the systematic evocative unfolding therapeutic task, respectively). Since meaning construction occurs in the matrix of interpersonal experiences, Watson and Rennie's (1994) study also considered clients' accounts of their positive and negative experience during the sessions, defined session momentum. Findings revealed that positive momentum was associated to a sense of camaraderie and teamwork with the therapist, while negative momentum related to difficulties to meet the therapist's requests.

Research on change during LDC supports the process of meaning construction described. Grounded in the Innovative Moments Model (IMM; Gonçalves, Matos, & Santos, 2009, Cardoso, Silva, Goncalves, & Duarte, 2014a, 2014b; Cardoso, Janeiro, & Duarte, 2016), studied meaning construction during LDC through the analysis of innovative moments. These refer to moments during the counseling dialog in which the client challenges the repetitive and redundant problematic self-narrative by introducing novelty in his/her usual way of behaving, thinking and feeling (Gonçalves et al., 2009; Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Silva, Mendes, & Sousa, 2016). Results revealed that clients' narrative transformation begins with the understanding of the problem, identification of life themes and the emergence of a new self-representation. Subsequently, the client's behavior evolves to more frequent expressions of well-being, and references to new career plans and behaviors to implement them. This change of pattern mirrors the one suggested to describe clients' operations in LDC (Savickas, 2015). In accordance, there were findings showing that clients perceive that LDC allows the improvement of self-discovery, self-awareness, connection, and sense of direction (Cardoso et al., 2016). All these could be seen as expressions of reflexive self-examination and making new realizations.

1.2. Study goals

Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of client operations was developed in the context of EFT (Greenberg et al., 1993) and as far as we know, no empirical study addressed the adequacy of this theoretical proposal to LDC practice. To fill this gap, the study presented here used Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR; Kagan, 1975) to analyze client operations and their experience of a LDC session. Based on Savickas (2015) proposal for the sequence of client operations and in research on the LDC process (Cardoso et al., 2014a, 2014b; Cardoso et al., 2016), it is expected that the sequence of client operations in LDC will be in agreement with Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of change on client operations. Thus, by focusing on client operations and their session momentum this exploratory study contributes to our understanding of meaning construction in LDC.

To achieve this goal, the second session of the LDC process was chosen for its importance to narrative identity construction. In fact, this session is dedicated to the identification of a life theme in order to facilitate the reorganization of clients' life episodes and, consequently, the re-writing of their narrative identity. Accordingly, research has shown that this session is evaluated by clients as LDC's most useful session to promote self-discovery, self-awareness, sense of connection and sense of direction (Cardoso et al., 2016). Moreover, research has also revealed that clients' narrative innovation rises significantly during this session.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Clients

Four Portuguese adolescent clients aged 18 years were interviewed. One male and three females, self-identified as Caucasian provided their informed consent to participate. The interviewees attended the last year of secondary school (12th grade). In this school level, students are required to specify a vocational choice, which implies a school-to-college transition or a school-to-work transition. Participants sought the help of a counselor to address this developmental task. The need to specify which higher education to follow is illustrated in the words of two participants: "I would like you to help me in discovering what is the best college degree for me" or "I would like to understand what I need to pursue".

2.1.2. Counselor

The counselor was the first author of this article. A Caucasian male with more than twenty years of practice in career counseling, in general, and about eight years of experience in the LDC framework, in particular. He also has training and practice in psychotherapy and a PhD in vocational psychology.

2.1.3. Interpersonal Process Recall inquiry interviewers

The fifth and the sixth authors of this article conducted the IPR inquiry interviews. Both are Caucasian women sharing interests in studying the process of counseling. The former, has a PhD in vocational psychology and more than 10 years of practice as career counselor. The latter, an assistant professor in psychology and researcher, is a psychotherapist with psychodynamic and humanistic orientations. Their training in IPR was based both on reading relevant literature on the subject (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008; Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992) and on training in the use of IPR with two cases, before interviewing two clients each.

2.1.4. Judges in data analysis

The team of judges included the third and fourth authors of this article, an assistant professor and researcher with a PhD in social psychology and an assistant professor and researcher with a PhD in psychology and specialization in environmental psychology. Both have shared interests and have had experience in qualitative data collection and analysis for more than 15 years and are not trained counselors or therapists. Prior to the qualitative data coding and first round of qualitative analysis, the judges were blind to the study goals and unfamiliar with the literature on the subject, therefore not having any prior expectations concerning the results. The second author, a full professor in vocational psychology and an expert in life design paradigm, acted as the external auditor of the judges as well as the data coding and analysis.

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Recruitment

Recruitment took place at a Portuguese high school. On receiving permission from the local school authorities for the study, the school psychologist counselor invited 12th grade students with career indecisions to participate in the study. Next, the main researcher met with four volunteers to inform them about the objectives of the study, the process of data collection, the assurance of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In this meeting, participants took a written informed consent to be signed by them and their parents, and delivered it in the first counseling session.

2.2.2. Interpersonal Process Recall interviews

This technique was developed by Kagan (1975) and allows researchers to study clients' recollection of their experiences in counseling or therapy (Larsen et al., 2008). IPR involved a participant and an interviewer watching a video-recorded session, shortly after the LDC second session. During video viewing the interviewer assists the client in describing his/her experiences in particular moments of the counseling session. The fact that IPR implies a client's removed examination from oneself in interaction with the counselor makes this technique suitable to study client operations in LDC.

In this study participants were requested to pause the recording upon recognition of significant moments. When this occurred, the interviewer presented the core study question: "How did you experience the significant moments in the video-recorded session?" Specific questions explored: the emergence of client significant moments; thoughts and feelings experienced in the event analyzed; what changes occurred during the significant moment; and which factors determined those changes. Non-bias in the interview was assured by avoiding Rogerian-type reflections. Moreover, in order to focus the client in the task, the importance of exploring each significant moment as they had been experienced in the session was emphasized. There was also the requirement of not projecting the moment in career counseling reflexivity experienced during the IPR interview. This warning was repeated when the client drifted away from the session under analysis.

At the end of each interview, clients were questioned about their experience of the IPR interview, in order to validate the credibility of the interview process and gain more understanding about the information gathered. Through the description of significant moments, client operations are revealed because participants report moments of reflexivity. These are moments in which they turn their attention to the inner experience, focusing on what they are thinking, feeling, and sensing, while elaborating the narrative symbolization of experience (Rennie, 2011).

The IPR interviews were conducted one day after the second counseling session. Initially the researcher informed the client that the interview's focus would be on their experience of significant moments throughout the session. Interviews lasted an average of 1.5 h (range 1–2 h) and were video recorded and transcribed for later data analysis, with the consent of the participants and their parents.

2.2.3. Data coding and analysis

The clients' reports of their subjective experiences were coded and analyzed qualitatively first through a data-driven (bottom-up) analysis process and subsequently validated through a theory-driven (top-down) analysis process. The data-driven approach was carried out first based on a thematic analysis performed by the two judges. This first approach was implemented to minimize risks of preconceived ideas and expectations that could bias the coding.

Through this procedure, the two judges independently read the transcripts of three clients to familiarize themselves with the participants' recalled experience of the counseling session. Data from a fourth client was initially not shared with the judges and was set aside for a subsequent analysis to assess theoretical saturation of the identified categories through the second step in the procedure. After familiarizing themselves with the data, the two judges independently selected meaningful excerpts of text for subsequent coded. A list of meaningful excerpts was then selected jointly by consensus of the two judges.

Next, each judge independently performed a thematic analysis, identifying categories named in a language closely tied to the language of the participants. This process required a continuous revision of the cases to assess whether they contained evidence not yet coded for the categories. Finally, judges met to discuss their individual analyses to achieve consensus on the final list of categories and corresponding example excerpts. The auditor, a third judge expert in the field, reviewed the categories and provided feedback concerning the meaning units, thus producing a final list of meaning units for the subsequent analysis.

A second step in the qualitative analysis used a theory-driven process. For this to take place, the two-judge team familiarized themselves with the relevant literature and concepts, with the goal of performing a construct/theoretical validation of the identified categories. For this to be achieved, the judges performed an additional thematic analysis on the final list of meaningful units and coded categories. After a training in which the two judges coded a sample of excerpts together, each judge independently assigned the excerpts that were included in the categories obtained through a data-driven analysis, to the client operations categories proposed by Watson and Rennie (1994). After the independent analysis, the team members reached a consensus about the fit between the categories identified through a data-driven analysis and the categories of client operations identified through the theory-driven analysis. The auditor, and third judge, then examined the resulting consensus version and adjusted the categories names, for better agreement with its theoretical wording.

Finally, the theory-driven analysis was applied to the fourth client transcripts, which allowed identifying the descriptive subcategory “imagery” within the category symbolic representation of experience, thus achieving the categories' theoretical saturation, which was not achieved with the transcripts of the first three clients. Overall, the goal of this two-step procedure was achieved, given that there was consistency between the categories identified through the data-driven and theory-driven approaches, with the former approach validating the categories identified through the latter.

3. Results

The data derived from the interview transcripts consisted of 92 meaning units. In the data-driven process of analysis these meaning units were clustered into five categories and 17 descriptive subcategories: (1) problem identification (new problem(s) formulations; problem causes and consequences; internal barriers and external barriers), (2) use of temporal anchors and language frames (thoughts; re-experiencing feelings; negative affect; positive affect; ambivalence), (3) new sense-making (integrating past and present; new insights; emergent identity); (4) problem solving strategies (perceived resources; action planning; alternative perspectives; intention to fight problem(s)' and new aims) and (5) reflections on the counselling process.

The meaning units/excerpts in these categories and descriptive subcategories were then reanalyzed through a theory-driven process to assess its fit to the model of client operations proposed by Watson and Rennie (1994). As expected, the clients' report of their operations followed a sequence similar to the one proposed by these authors (see Table 1): symbolic representation of experience, making new realizations, reflexive self-examination and revisioning self.

The first two operations expressed the efforts of participants to explore internal and external experience in life episodes, as well as reflections on themselves to check the validity of their symbolizations of those experiences. Two additional operations expressed a higher level of experience symbolization, since it implied the emergence of a new narrative order and the self-transformation resulting from it.

While reflecting on their experiences, clients also attended to what occurred between them and the counselor in order to regulate their relationship. Concerning clients' session momentum, findings were in agreement with the results of Watson and Rennie (1994), showing that clients had positive and negative experiences of the second LDC session.

The analysis of descriptive sub-categories within each category, allowed deepening the understanding of meaning construction in LDC. Throughout the results presentation illustrative quotes are identified by participant number (e.g., P1 refers to participant one).

Table 1
Categories and descriptive categories of client operations and session momentum.

Client operations				Session momentum	
Symbolic representation of experience	Reflexive self-examination	Making new realizations	Revisioning self	Positive	Negative
Cognitive affective processes	Scrutinizing behavior	Identification of life themes	Sense of purpose	Security	Feelings of vulnerability
Experiencing feelings	Insight elaborations	Connecting life theme to current experiences	Alternative ways of being	Communion	Unclear expectations
Imagery	Linking internal experience to life events	Sense of order New self-positions	Clearer sense of career alternatives	Relieve	
Speech acts	Linking micronarratives to current events		Exploration of new career options		
Concerns in reporting the experience	Favorite story Motto Role models		Feelings of self-determination, self-soothing and hope		
Awareness events	Linking past and present experiences				
Counselor inferences	Evaluating pros and cons				
Discourse as self-advise					
Discourse as font of strength					
Early recollections					

3.1. Symbolic representation of experience

In this category, descriptive subcategories show participants' use of cognitive and affective processes to symbolize needs: “I felt that I really needed help, that I had to find help with this issue” (P1). One client used imagery to reflect on her experience: “I was talking about that and all these images went through my head and I relived those moments” (P4). Another operation describing experience symbolization was speech acts in which the clients are concerned about the narrative adequacy. This operation is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“Because I feel things but the, to put them in words, I'm not able, normally” (P1). Finally, the third operation that makes possible symbolic representation of experience was identified as awareness events, that is, session events allowing the clarification of personal experience. This is represented by counselor inferences opening the path to symbolic representation of needs: “Saying that I was unloved. That's when I realized a little that maybe that's where I seek help from other people and trying in a certain way to get them to recognize me” (P1). Awareness events also occur when clients use their discourse as self-advice, as a tool clarifying how to behave. For example, one client uses her own words as self-advice for not having preferred relationships over others, in her internship: “This part here was…for me to understand and so that I could say that there are always new boys and we can't have…that one's my favorite and I'm gonna be with him forever” (P3). The discourse was also used as a source of strength: “By talking about this I managed to have that strength of OK”. The use of an early recollection was also an awareness event used for the construction of a meaningful affirmation:

“Your colleague asked me once, at one point when it occurred to me, about my childhood and I remembered to talk about when I had a nursemaid, but I also, I was there and I helped take care of the babies. I remembered this and I gave it the title of when life makes sense” (P2).

3.2. Reflexive self-examination

The process of meaning construction continued with clients' reflexive examination of themselves. The descriptive categories of this operation reveal client's reflexivity by linking current and past events, behaviors and feelings. Markers of reflexive efforts were expressions such as: “It made me think,” “I started to think…” “I think I made the link…” or “I realized that…”.

Reflexive self-examination expressed clients' efforts to elaborate on the causes and consequences of a problem. This process implied scrutinizing behaviors as shown in one client's words: “I thought that maybe that's why I depend so much on the help of others and then I end up being rejected, I don't feel complete and I do worse and worse” (P1). The operation favored first the insight elaborations focused on the problem's causes and consequences. This was illustrated in the words of a client referring to a significant moment in which the counselor confronted her tendency towards perfectionism: “This part, we're not perfect, it made me think…but I'm always trying to be perfect ” (P1). To check the validity of their insights and conceptualizations clients also used linking internal experiences to life events. One client said: “I was remembering the times when I give too much to people and they don't give me anything and I get sort of upset” (P2). *Linking micro-narratives to current events* was another operation used to link episodes evoked in the Career Construction Interview to current experiences. This operation favoring the rewriting of narrative identity, is highlighted by one client when exploring life episodes for connecting a life motto to personal experiences: “I remembered things that…about the times that I've said… when I had to put my life's motto in into practice (P3)”.

The reflexive operations for self-examination also involved linking past and current events as well as the evaluation of pros and cons of the client's own behavior. The last operation is illustrated in the following transcription where the client reconsidered problem consequences: “This was good for me because I also saw the pros and cons of giving…because sometimes I give too much of myself and sometimes I get myself hurt” (P2).

3.3. Making new realizations

Symbolic representation of experience and reflexive self-examination were basic operations of meaning construction since they allowed understanding the particularities of an individuals' internal and external experiences. These meanings are fundamental for the emergence of operations needed to promote higher levels of self-narrative continuity and coherence. Making new realizations is one of those operations allowing a client to use identification of life themes, as revealed in the words of one client: “Understanding, well, what I've done wrong, before, things that are now having negative consequences in my life. And it's getting worse, well, the snowball is getting bigger and bigger” (P1). Searching for a “new order”, clients identified patterns of functioning by connecting life themes to current experiences. The words of one client reveal this process when she connects a life theme to career plans in professional helping and support occupations: “I'd never thought that I might get involved with these sort of cases, I'd only thought that…if…perhaps I would be able to put up with seeing all of that…the tragedy. I hadn't thought it through that I might get involved. I only thought that it might happen if I became a psychologist” (P2). The words of a client are explicit in this regard:

Client – This is important because I begin to see that it's all related, some things with others. Career counselor – And what were you thinking when you saw the relationship between all this? What did you feel?

Client – That we had gotten somewhere (P3).

The category of making new realization operations also includes the elaboration of new self-positions and, therefore, the increasing complexity of the self-narrative. The words of a client referring the development of her problematic facet, illustrate this: “Here it was, like, I figured out how much my bad side had grown, the devil side” (P1). *New self-position* operations also involve processes through which there is a repositioning of the self through an affirmative or assertive process. This was evident in the excerpt where the same client spoke about the conflict between different self-positions:

Career Counselor - “Why was the exercise important for you?”

Client - It was saying what I might be thinking, but I had been afraid to say. No, I'm not really open to…doing it. And that that I think I should do, the right thing to do, but that which I'm not doing because I'm afraid to and because…well, Catarina, the other Catarina, coming out on top, and well, putting her down” (P1).

3.4. Revisioning self

The client's gradual transformation allows revisioning of self which is revealed through the construction of a sense of purpose not restricted to work roles. Two clients referred to the person they wanted to become, an elaboration made using as reference childhood role models: “My aunt is a role model…” (P2) and “I think that it was important here as well because…I spoke about three people that I admire. I think this was important for my discovery of what I want to do” (P3). However, the work role is also viewed as a source of a sense of purpose, “I think that that's when life makes sense, when we are doing something that we enjoy” (P3).

Revisioning self also implies the search of alternative ways of being, which are fundamental to sustain the transformations achieved. In that sense, clients' words are clear: “I want to improve myself because one day they are going to like me” (P2) and “Assume myself in front of the class and say “OK I am here, the problems have ended, and it's over” (P4). As individuals construct their narrative identity, through the continuous process of self-organization, they impose narrative continuity and coherence on their vocational experiences (Savickas, 2011b). This process of revisioning self is revealed through a clearer sense of career alternatives. The words of a client are very clear in this regard: “This made me see that all that I am, all that I have done, all that is there behind… will lead me in the future into a kind of activity related to helping others” (P4).The construction of a coherent self-narrative also promotes the resolution of inconsistencies between career plans. One client said: “Because I'm in science and now to include arts, well, it complicates things somewhat for me. But I managed to do that filtering since it didn't mess my choice up too much…Really, I can link things up, but just not all together” (P1). However, the client's words also evidence ambivalent resolution related to the exploration of new career options: “I was stuck on that, like it's science and I don't know what else, but it doesn't have art, any creativity. I could do some in my free time but I know if I could bring it all together. And this way, he got me to search out something that brought it all together” (P1). Revisioning self is also accompanied by feelings of self-determination, self-soothing and hope, revealing the affective expression of the client's transformation as well as the role of emotion-strengthening in the change process. For example, at the end of the session one client used a life motto to strengthen the transformation achieved: “Of hope, of joy, of… believing… of “I believe”… which is the motto that I have… always here… that there is always a solution for everything… and for that too” (P4).

3.5. Session momentum

Results show that client operations were accompanied by negative and positive session momentums. When negative, the clients experienced *feelings of vulnerability*: “Yeah, in some moments…I'm really sensitive” (P2) and unclear expectations of what to

say or do when the counselor stayed silent, waiting for the client exploration of inner experiences: "I don't know if it's really pertinent but sometimes when he was quiet [the counselor] and we were talking about something…I don't know if it was in order to complete my idea, or not, and I was stuck there without knowing what to do..." (P1).

When positive, clients' experienced feelings of security: "Here in the sessions I felt ease to talk about that things" (P4) and communion "I have said things that I would keep only for myself, no one ever knew" (P4). Positive experience of the session was also related to feelings of relief, "It was like freeing myself, it was saying what I thought. I felt better, lighter … (P1)".

4. Discussion

To evaluate the sequence of client operations for meaning construction in LDC, we used IPR to analyze clients' subjective experiences throughout a session of career counseling. Results are consistent with the hypothesis that client operations in LDC follow a similar sequence to the one conceptualized by Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of clients' change. That is, in LDC, clients´ operations for meaning construction progress from symbolic representation of experience and reflexive self-examination towards making new realizations and revisioning self. This progression is consistent with a narrative perspective of meaning construction, suggesting that the construction of a coherent meaning system results from dynamic processes through which the plurality of life experiences becomes interconnected and articulated (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008). The complexity of this dynamic led Watson and Rennie (1994) to propose a nonlinear progression of client operations. This pattern was also observed throughout the LDC's second session, since there were significant moments in which the client returned to low level operations, in order to facilitate a higher level narrative elaboration. For example, reflexive self-examination could imply an effort towards symbolic representation, as revealed in the words of one client, "This need, this search for…to be loved, to, you know… I can't find the words…I always feel this lack" (P1).

The results concerning both the sequence of clients operations and the nonlinearity of its progression, complements results showing that narrative innovation develops from a focus in structuring the past to an increased engagement in projecting the future career plans. This also complements results showing that this transformation throughout LDC sessions implies repeated cycles of basic types of narrative innovation to support the elaboration of higher levels of narrative innovation (Cardoso et al., 2014a, 2014b).

According to Watson and Rennie's (1994) model of client operations, clients refer to negative and positive experiences throughout the LDC session. This result, showing that clients' attention and activity during the session is also focused in the relational dimension of the process, evidence client/counselor relationship as a core LDC dimension (Savickas, 2015).

Clients reporting a mix of session negative and positive experiences also portray client/counselor relationship as a dynamic and challenging process. This process management requires taking into account the interplay between multiple variables such as clients' characteristics (e.g. vulnerability) and relationship variables (e.g. expectations and beliefs) referred to by participants, as well as variables related to the intervention setting and the strategies and techniques used (Cardoso, 2016).

Despite similarities between client operations in the second session of LDC and Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of change, there were differences that might be explained by particularities of tasks and goals of both LDC and EFT. First, in the study presented here, descriptive categories of symbolic representation of experience did not have a diverse content, as occurs in Watson and Rennie's study. In LDC the limited range of client operations for symbolic representation of experience could result from the counselor's lack of focus on clients' emotional experience. The latter occurs in emotion-focused practices such as the one used by Watson and Rennie to develop the micro-theory of client operations. The therapeutic task used by these authors "requires clients to evoke vividly the scene in which they experienced their problematic reactions, thereby facilitating clients´ symbolic representation of internal and external experience" (Watson & Rennie, 1994, p.506).

Second, during LDC sessions, reflexive self-examinations implied operations favoring the construction of links between life events and micro-narratives, and past and present events. This result could be justified by characteristics of LDC tasks, namely its focus on the evocation of life episodes and its interconnection, to help clients think about their whole life story (Savickas & Hartung, 2012). Recent research shows that adolescents value these counseling tasks since they facilitate the construction of a sense of continuity among the past, the present, and the future (Cardoso et al., 2016).

Third, descriptive categories implying new realizations and revisioning self differ from the ones reported by Watson and Rennie. These findings might be explained by the LDC goal of fostering a continuous and coherent life narrative for career construction (Savickas, 2011a). In fact, descriptive categories of making new realizations (identify life theme, connecting life theme to current experiences and sense of order) reveal a client's reflexive narrative processes. Indeed, research shows these processes as being fundamental to the development of a sense of the life story's continuity and self-coherence (Angus & Hardtke, 2007; Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992). In consequence, revisioning self-descriptive subcategories (sense of purpose, alternative ways of being and clearer sense of career alternatives) express LDC focus in supporting clients' career construction.

4.1. Study limitations and research implications

There are limitations in this study worth noting. First, the small number of participants suggests the need for future studies to use larger groups of participants, which should include participants at different moments of their career development. Data from

more diverse populations will increase the external validity of the model of client operations in LDC. Nevertheless, as the goal of the current study was to present a qualitative analysis and a theoretical validation of categories found, which was achieved, the clients recruited and the richness of their session transcripts was sufficient in this regard. Second, the absence of outcome measures should prompt future researchers to consider the use of these measures to clarify differences between client operations in good and poor outcome cases. Third, only the second session of LDC was considered in this exploratory study, which may have reduced the number of operations identified in the data. Nevertheless, the analysis of a fourth client's data aimed to overcome this, by assuring theoretical saturation of categories found with the other three, which allowed a diverse array of client operations to be identified. Still, future studies should analyze clients' reflexivity throughout all sessions in order to have a more complete understanding of meaning construction in LDC.

4.2. Implications for practice

Moving from an exploratory study of significant meaning moments in LDC towards the elaboration of implications for practice, is certainly a risky move. However, we ground our tentative suggestions in research on the process of LDC in particular, and career counseling in general. The first, includes the use of career counseling tasks aimed at helping clients in the exploration of their emotional experiences in order to facilitate its symbolic representation. This proposal is grounded in the findings of this study, showing the role of affective processes and awareness events as significant operations for meaning construction. This proposal is also grounded in psychotherapy research that shows the value of the exploration of emotions for the symbolization of needs (Greenberg, 2012), a core issue for life themes identification (Savickas, 2015).

We could also argue in favor of practices that help clients in connecting feelings, behavior and life episodes, in order to promote an increased understanding of problems´ causes and consequences. As shown by these findings, such practices stimulate reflexive operations needed for the construction of a narrative with coherence and continuity. In the same sense, research on the LDC process and outcome (Cardoso et al., 2016; Refhuss, Del Corso, Glavin, & Wykes, 2011) evidenced that clients perceive the LDC tasks as beneficial, favoring self-awareness and a sense of connection.

Lastly, clients' sensitivity to negative experiences resulting from the counselor/client relationship is a marker of the need to continuously negotiate the working alliance to avoid ruptures (Safran & Muran, 2000). In that sense, the discussion of career counseling tasks and goals plays a central role in developing and maintaining the working alliance (Bordin, 1979).

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