

## Portraiture: A Career Construction Counseling Method

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Mark L. Savickas

During career construction counseling, a pivotal point occurs when a practitioner turns from interviewing a client about small stories to a dialogue about the large story. The success of this pivot depends on the preparation and presentation of a career portrait, that is, a verbal portrait of a client composed for counseling discourse. Before describing career portraiture, the main topic of this article, I discuss the importance of stories in career construction counseling.

Vocational guidance interprets inventory scores, and career coaching teaches how to deal with developmental tasks. In comparison, career construction counseling elicits and edits stories to clarify choices and shape lives. Stories provide the means by which cultures communicate complex ideas about how to live in society. Cultural stories present scripts for the timing of life events as well as provide evaluative frameworks for interpretation and meaning-making. Individuals use cultural stories as sources for self-construction. There is nothing in the self that was not first in society. The stories that individuals learn and like shape the way they think and how they form an identity. Functioning as an autobiographical author, a self coalesces individually interesting and personally significant stories into one overarching explanation of lived experience. Using life themes and personal values, this large story links the disparate events in small stories together into a continuous, coherent, compelling, and complicated autobiography. In making career decisions, individuals use self-constructed stories of their work life in autobiographical reasoning to deal with biographical disruptions caused by vocational

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M. L. Savickas (✉)  
Department of Family and Community Medicine, Northeast Ohio Medical University,  
Rootstown, USA  
E-Mail: ms@neomed.edu

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development tasks, occupational transitions, or work troubles. Consequently, career construction counseling concentrates on helping clients who encounter problematic tasks, transitions, or troubles by prompting them to review and rewrite a large story that resolves the problem they experience.

As I begin counseling for career construction, I concentrate on comprehending and appreciating a client's small stories about career construction experiences. Following the admonition of the literary critic Eudora Welty (1984), I listen for the story, not to the story. To listen for the story systematically, I ask a uniform set of questions in a structured format called the *Career Construction Interview (CCI)* (Savickas, 2015, Chap. 3). The *CCI* consists of five story-crafting questions that focus attention on the essential constructs that shape a career story and form a vocational identity. In telling their stories, clients are remembering the past in a way that anticipates a possible future. Clients tell practitioners the stories that they themselves need to hear. From all their available stories, they narrate those stories that support current goals and inspire action. Rather than reporting historical facts, individuals remembering the past so that prior events support current choices and lay the groundwork for future moves. This subjective truth often differs from objective facts because it fictionalizes the past in order to preserve dispositional continuity and narrative coherence in the face of biographical change. It is critical that neither the client nor the practitioner view the career stories as determining the future; instead, they should view the stories as a function of autobiographical reasoning to evaluate opportunities and constraints to shape the future.

Clients, as they tell their stories, feel that they become more real. The more stories they tell, the more real they become. The more they view their "me", the more they elaborate their narrative identity. Storytelling crystallizes what they think of themselves. Many clients laugh and cry while telling their stories because they see their life themes emerge in the space between client and practitioner. It is important that practitioners not interpret the stories but rather prompt client themselves to make sense of what their stories tell about them. Sense-making includes relating the stories to the problem posed at the beginning of the interview. It is also best to use the client's own favorite words (especially those they have used repeatedly) and most dramatic metaphors. Improving the narratability of the career story increases clients' ability to re-story their experience, understand who they are, and communicate what they seek.

In listening to client responses to the *CCI*, practitioners attempt to discern the career theme running through particulars of the five sets of responses. Client and practitioner eventually integrate the narrative constructions from the five sets of small stories or micro-narratives into one large story or macro-narrative. After the interview, practitioners string the separate small stories along a through-line to compose a coherent narrative that portrays the wider landscape and clarifies what is at stake. This large story or career portrait transcends the specific stories by synthesizing the disparate parts into a unified narrative of purpose and meaning. The macro-narrative told in the career portrait thereby places the client's concerns in sharp relief. In so doing, it enables autobiographical reasoning by highlighting the choices to make and actions to take. I have shared a

free manual that expounds career construction counseling (Savickas, 2015), which practitioners might find useful. In two publications I have written extensively about how to use the *CCI* and presented brief case studies (Savickas, 2019, 2020). I have also published training videos (2006, 2009) and a free workbook (Savickas & Hartung, 2021). I will not belabor those topics herein. Instead, I will now concentrate on one particular method—how to compose a career portrait based on the *CCI*. To do this, I present a case study, first briefly summarizing the results of a *CCI* and then explaining how one might arrange the stories into a career portrait that enables clients to make educational and vocational choices and then enact occupational roles that extend their careers.

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## 6.1 A Case Study

A key skill in counseling for career construction, and the topic of this article, involves composing a career portrait after conducting a *CCI*. To learn this skill, practice on the following case presentation about one client. Fred works as a middle-level manager at a large insurance company. He has recovered from substance abuse issues and is now considering a mid-career change. To begin the interview, I asked Fred, *How can I be useful to you in constructing your career?* Fred replied, *I need clarity on what I want to do next.* The following succinctly reports Fred's responses to the five *CCI* questions.

### Role Models

Stevie Ray Vaughn = He was a drug addict. He got clean.

Bruce Sutter = Outstanding; very cool; always in control of himself; always willing to speak with people; tenacious

Spider-Man = Cool; nerd; helped people; did good stuff; helped people fight evil; saved people

Bruce Lee = Determined; helped people fight against bad things happening to them; humble yet great skill; strong; huge personality; big heart

### Favorite Television Shows

Blacklist = About an ex-agent who went to wrong side of the tracks. He is redeeming himself. Works together with a team to put bad people away.

Walking Dead = People trying to survive. Team. Help each other. A dysfunctional family of a guidance counselor and her drug-addicted son. They must either revamp themselves or stick with their deep flaws.

### Current Favorite Story

The Croods = About a family with the world changing on them. They are afraid of the modern world. They find this guy who could help them. Every day they follow the light to tomorrow.

**Motto**

Never give up.

You are going to make where you are going to be.

**Earliest Recollection**

I was in the car with my old man, going to a boat show. Dad was a cop. A guy pulled up and caused trouble. Dad yanked out his gun. The guy went away.

Feeling = It was really scary.

Headline = Dad saved the day.

A practitioner may hear Fred's responses through the amplifier of their favorite career theory. A practitioner may listen for a client's self-efficacy, personality type, or career beliefs. As for me, I listen for the critical constructs with which clients storied their careers. In what follows, I consider Fred's responses to the *CCI* and arrange them into an initial career portrait that he will edit and authorize. I typically follow a seven-step routine to comprehend story elements that I will combine into a career portrait.

**First**, I began to make sense of Fred's micro-narratives by considering how he wants to use the counseling experience. His goal provides the perspective from which to view the stories and anticipate the counseling dialogue to come. In response to my introductory question, Fred responded that from counseling he sought clarity on what he wants to do next. Clarity means that a situation has become less confused and more comprehensible. Fred's choice of the word "clarity" suggests that he already has some ideas about what he wants to do next. This understanding gives a point of reference. I will seek to support him to further make sense of and more fully articulate his tacit understanding of what he wants to do next. In particular, I will clarify the constructs he uses to make sense of career experiences and shape his aspirations.

**Second**, I considered Fred's early recollection. In career construction counseling, an early recollection expresses an apperceptive schema, that is, a structure for understanding something perceived in terms of previous experience. The first four questions in the *CCI* activate an early recollection closely tied to the present situation and current emotions. It is emblematic of the larger career concern and encapsulates the central issue in the concern experienced by a client. To prompt Fred to consider the meaning of his early recollection, I had asked him to imagine that the recollected story was going to appear in a newspaper and it needed a catchy headline, one that includes a verb. In career construction counseling, a headline presents a rhetorical compression that expresses the gist of a story. Fred's headline used the verb "saved". This is a particularly important form of movement in his life. To me it may mean that Fred has been saved himself and would like to save others. I then looked to the remaining *CCI* stories for evidence to support this idea, and indeed found substantial evidence in his role models and favorite story.

**Third**, I looked at Fred's models for self-design. As the architect of his own character, he has selected them as blueprints because they have solved the problems he himself

of Fred's career portrait involved more than talking about how he transformed a painful symptom into an agentic strength; it included how that strength can become a social contribution. I emphasized his progression of active mastery as he moved from symptom to strength to social contribution that is from scared to saved to saving others. I focused on dramatic movements in talking about where Fred is headed and his agency in directing this movement.

Of course, I present a portrait to a client as a tentative sketch ready for co-construction discourse, not the truth. For career construction counseling, co-construction refers to the idea that the real subject of a career portrait is not so much that of the client or the practitioner, rather it reflects the encounter between the two—a vivid portrait drawn by the two artists as they co-construct a more narratable and meaningful career story. A career portrait gets its validity from organizing the particulars of a life into an internally consistent and personally meaningful story. In the end, the narrative truth of a career portrait is arbitrated by its utility to the client in prompting story innovations (Goncalves et al., 2009) that develop deeper meaning and open new avenues of action. Explanation of the procedures and processes for career construction counseling in and of itself are available in several resources (Cardoso et al., 2019; Savickas, 2015, 2019, 2020). To develop further skill at the art and science of portraiture in general readers may consult Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (2002).

Fred, who already held a bachelor's degree, completed a four-course certificate program on addiction counseling at a community college. He followed his own advice and *made the place where he was going to be* by creating an employee assistance program that he coordinates with the human resources team of his longtime employer.

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**Mark L. Savickas** is Professor and Chair Emeritus of the Behavioral Sciences Department at the Northeast Ohio Medical University and Adjunct Professor of Counselor Education and Supervision at Kent State University. He has honorary doctorates from the University of Pretoria in South Africa and the University of Lisbon in Portugal.