



## Prologue: Reshaping the story of career counselling

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Entering the work world and moving through occupational positions requires more effort and confidence today than it did in the modern industrial era. Working in the postmodern global economy entails more risks because, in a substantial way, jobs are being replaced by assignments and organisations by networks. Once taken for granted, matters such as job security, healthcare and pensions have become problematic. Individuals can no longer plan to work for 30 years developing a career within the boundaries of one organisation. Instead, they can expect during their lifetimes to occupy at least ten jobs, more properly called assignments. Healthcare, which was once the province of the employer, is now the concern of the employee. Pensions that once consisted of defined benefits promised by an employer are now reconstituted as defined contributions to a retirement plan managed by the employee.

The shift in the social arrangement of work has left individuals more responsible for managing their own lives. During the twentieth century, the company provided a holding environment. After workers matched themselves to an organisational position and were selected to occupy it, they could count on the organisation providing a grand narrative for how their lives would proceed. The company defined what shift they worked, where they lived, how they spent leisure time, whom they befriended and how much money they had. Similar to how a crib held them as a baby, their family held them during childhood and their peer group held them during adolescence, the organisation would hold them during adulthood. In the postmodern world, employees can no longer depend on an organisation to provide them with a familiar and predictable environment to hold their lives. Instead, individuals must rely on themselves to construct a story – a self



and a career – to hold themselves and their lives together when they encounter discontinuity. As they move from one assignment to the next they must let go of what they did but not of who they are. If they let go of everything, then the loss may overwhelm them. By holding onto the self in the form of a life story that provides meaning and continuity, they are able to move on in a way that advances narrative lines and actualises overarching goals.

To better assist clients in scripting and narrating their stories, many career counsellors have concluded that they must transform their practices. A transformation to meet the needs of postmodern living requires that the counselling profession formulate narrative models and self-construction methods that enable clients to articulate stories that hold the self. The metaphor of holding returns our view of career to its root meaning of cart or chariot. Rather than the path traversed during the industrial era, career now means the vessel that carries us forward. Simply stated, from a narrative perspective career becomes a carrier of meaning; and by extension, career counselling becomes a dialogue designed to infuse meaning into vocational choices and substantiate the self through work.

In response to clients' need to construct their own holding environment by scripting their stories, many career counsellors have embraced social constructionism and made the narrative turn. Narrative career counsellors help individuals move into their own story and learn to hold it, so that in the end the story can hold them and quell their uncertainty. Their narrative construction of self and career becomes the structure that provides meaning and direction as they encounter transitions that involve a loss of place, position and project. Yet as the authors in this volume explain, a clear and coherent story does more than just hold tension. Constructing the story turns tension into attention, and telling the reorganised narrative expresses intention.

In telling their stories, clients come into closer contact with their life experiences. Furthermore, telling expresses meaning and makes that meaning evident to both client and counsellor. As clients tell their stories, their lives start to add up. Story by story, they build the architecture of a larger narrative. Slowly they begin to consolidate narrative lines as they recognise the repetition of themes and, in due course, identify the underlying logic of the progression. As they make implicit meanings more evident, they evoke wider dimensions of meaning. Then they may elaborate and revise these dimensions of meaning to push back constraints and open new space for living. This revised narrative states what they already know about themselves and reorganises it into a life portrait that honours intuition, stirs the imagination and reveals intention. At the beginning of counselling, many clients are strangers in their own lives. At the end, they are able to use work to become more whole as they infuse their projects with their own purpose and plans.

The narratologists who have contributed chapters to *Shaping the story* discuss and demonstrate how counsellors facilitate meaning-making as they exercise narrative competence in validating client stories and apply biographical reasoning in positioning those stories in a social context. As a group, the authors breathe new life into career counselling models by examining the poetics of personhood and the politics of work. As individuals, the authors offer innovative methods to help

clients shape their stories and attune them to the work world. Because of the inspiration and instruction presented by the authors, this volume contributes substantially to shaping the story of the career services profession itself by showing how, in the global economy, stories supply a sense of continuity, coherence and commitment. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate how stories are improved by a good listener.

This book explains how counsellors, as good listeners, can use the relationship to help a client construct a self that alchemises his or her life into an aesthetic project of career. As clients reconstruct and reorganise their moving biographies, the counsellor serves as a validating witness to the emergent formation of a self that is in the process of producing new positions and projects. The client cannot fully comprehend this emergent self from within because it is created in the dialogue between client and counsellor. Understanding is better accomplished between people than by insight within a person. As a witness, the counsellor can explore the meaning constructed in the stories a client tells. The counsellor may also inquire about what the story evades, distorts or conceals; gently alluding to what the client wishes to hide – the secret that makes the story whole. The counsellor, of course, encourages clients, to the degree that they are ready, to openly declare who they are and become expert witnesses to their own world. As the first audience to a new production, a counsellor provides words that help to sum it up from an outside perspective. The counsellor carefully selects stabilising language that the client can use to hold the newly emerging self in place. Then, together, the client and counsellor can use this coherent and convincing narrative organisation of the self to generate plots that resolve career problems and shape work life. In addition to resolving the presenting concern, the counsellor's clear and compassionate retelling of a client's story aims to inspire and encourage the client to enter the next chapter of her or his life story.

*Shaping the story* succeeds superbly in meeting the goal of explaining how a good story about the self encourages a client to make career changes while holding onto a self that is even more vital and intentional. In fact, the authors accomplish this goal so well that the astute reader will conclude that they also tell an exciting story about how the profession of career counselling can transform itself to meet the needs of clients living in a postmodern society. As shaped by the editor, this volume offers career counsellors a story to hold onto as they reposition themselves in the global economy and renovate their profession for the information age. In telling the particulars of this story, the chapter authors' identify possibilities for transforming the career counselling profession that will inspire readers to consider what career intervention might become and will encourage counsellors to enter the world of narrative career construction. As counsellors do so, they will become better positioned to witness, validate and celebrate the radiant singularity of their clients' lives and careers.