



Reflection and reflexivity during life-design interventions: Comments on Career Construction Counseling



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 August 2016

Accepted 3 September 2016

Keywords:

Reflexivity

Counseling

Narratives

Life design

Career construction

ABSTRACT

The 8 articles in the Symposium advanced understanding of “Reflexivity in Life-Design Interventions”. This discussion highlights distinctions between reflection and reflexivity, as well as their relation to first-order and second-order change. Then the contributions of the Symposium authors are organized using four phases of narrative counseling: symbolic representation, reflective self-examination, reflexive new realizations, and revisioning career identity. The discussion concludes by organizing the diverse terms the authors used to name these four phases into a uniform format.

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The authors of the research reported in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life-Design Interventions (Savickas & Guichard, 2016) designed their studies to address three questions: “What changes during life design intervention? What elements prompt these changes? How was reflexivity fostered and developed?” While reading the Symposium articles, I assumed a distinction between reflection and reflexivity. From the perspective of career construction theory, to reflect means to deliberate on past experiences or present circumstance. As a part of the life-designing intervention known as Career Construction Counseling (Savickas, 2011), practitioners prompt this serious thinking and careful consideration by conducting a structured interview, that is, the Career Construction Interview (Savickas, 2015). Client reflection about self, stories, and scripts produces concrete knowledge and prompts self-examination relevant to the current career transition. In the subsequent counseling session, counselors foster client reflexivity and prompt new action.

Although related to reflection, reflexivity differs from it. Clients use reflection to learn about self yet use reflexivity to change self in some way (Hibbert, Coupland, & MacIntosh, 2010). According to Rennie (1992) reflection involves self-awareness, while reflexivity involves self-awareness plus agency within that self-awareness. Reflexivity fosters a self-awareness that flows into intention. It leads to making decisions with self-awareness and taking action with personal meaning (Rennie, 2004). This sense-making activity enables individuals to change self and behavior. Thus for the Career Construction Interview, reflection involves client self-observation while subsequent reflexivity brings about change in self based on that reflection. The conceptualization of reflexivity in the life-designing intervention known as Life- and Career-Design Dialogues (Guichard, 2008) is similar to the Career Construction Counseling conceptualization. In Guichard’s counseling discourse, reflexivity means a “process of dialogic interpretation of the self” in which people “put into action their capacity to create and to define new perspectives when faced with transition situations” (Bangali, Masdonati, Fournier, & Goyer, 2015, p. 23). In short, both Career Construction Counseling and the Life- and Career-Design Dialogues conceptualize reflexivity as careful consideration of current issues that produces a new perspective to guide life choices (D’Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendex, 2007; Elliott, 2001).

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The agency within reflexivity refers to a sense of being able to take action (Walter & Peller, 1992). Reflexivity encourages biographic agency by reframing disruptions as transitions and turning points, then highlighting a connection to the future that links with continuities from the past. Clients can acquire ideas, information, and experience based on existing knowledge in a way that has new meaning. They also may reorganize what they already know. Projecting this narrative innovation into the future clarifies decisions and enhances engagement in career planning.

1. Client role induction

As a group the Symposium articles show the importance of positioning a client for the work to come. Of course the life-design interventions began by eliciting clients statements regarding their perceptions, confusion, indecision, and feelings about their career concern. The client's problem statement was followed by a discussion of the tasks and goals of life-design dialogues. To introduce life-design interventions, counselors must clarify what the Career Construction Counseling and life- and career-dialogues can and cannot do. Life-design interventions do not address all career concerns. They use narrative counseling methods, not vocational guidance, academic advising, nor occupational placement. Clients who seek guidance or advice may be dissatisfied with life-design interventions. To avoid this dissatisfaction, counselors must emphasize the client's core role and explain to clients that they will have to do most of the work of analyzing and thinking about issues. A discussion of life-designing goals and tasks plays a central role in developing a working alliance.

To initiate the working alliance, Career Construction Counseling begins with the question of "How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?" Maree (2016) noted that displaying an authentic desire to be useful to the clients created a relaxed atmosphere conducive to self-discovery and meaning. Two different cases reported in the Symposium articles showed the importance of using this question to develop a working alliance. A client described by Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinus (2016) had difficulty in answering the question. At first Thelma wondered if she was to tell the counselor how to help her. Later Thelma reported that she found the counselor to be very helpful in being persistent about the opening question. In a second example, Reid, Bimrose, and Brown (2016) described a client who was recruited by another client. Susan may not have clearly envisioned her role in counseling. Susan seemed to want to quickly form a plan with practical steps. Susan was upset by the question about how counseling could be useful to her. Then she seemed resistant and defensive because she felt forced to answer the Career Construction Interview questions which intensified negative emotions about her situation. She may have preferred the interventions of vocational guidance or occupational placement. At the beginning of counseling, both Thelma and Susan seemed to feel vulnerable rather than secure in the relationship.

When client goals align with life-design intervention goals, clients experience feelings of security in the relationship. Then they feel safe in engaging in dialogues that deconstruct and then reconstruct their career stories (Taylor & Savickas, 2016). The client described by Cardoso et al. (2016) expressed feelings of relief in stating that "It was like freeing myself. It was saying what I thought. I felt better, lighter...". Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinus (2016) reported that Thelma also expressed relief in being able to talk about her problem with someone. She explained that her "parents completely stopped talking about this after I quit my engineering studies". When clients believe that they are being heard and feel validated, they reflect more deeply on their career narratives.

2. Client processes in the performance model

The Symposium articles described how clients reacted when counselors implemented life-design interventions. The Interpersonal Process Recall sessions further illuminated client "internal operations, subjective experience, and intentionality" (Watson & Rennie, 1994, p. 500). Life-design interventions reported in the Symposium articles promoted client development and adaptation through a continuous process of self-organization that allowed clients to order experiences, construct meaning, and form intentions. Watson and Rennie (1994) have conceptualized a performance model that describes this ongoing process of self and career construction. As I read the Symposium articles, I used their performance model of client operations to identify client activities and changes. The sequence of client operations in life-design intervention (i.e., both Savickas' Career Construction Counseling and Guichard's Life- and Career-Design Dialogues) followed closely the contours of Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of change. First, clients formulated symbolic representations of experience by articulating micro-narratives. Second, they reflected on these representations to understand how they had constructed self and career as well as to illuminate current needs, interests, and goals. Third, clients conceptualized new realizations through formulating a macro-narrative or life portrait. Finally, clients revised their career identity through envisioning realistic alternatives, stating new intentions, and forming action plans. These four phases as they appeared in the life-designing process reported in the Symposium articles each merit further elaboration.

3. Symbolic representation of experience

The results reported in each of the Symposium articles showed that clients used cognitive and affective processes to symbolize their careers and heighten self-awareness of their needs. Narrative symbolization of experience is the most basic operation that makes self-organization possible. It involves recollecting as a means to articulate career-relevant experiences and then re-experiencing them to elaborate their meaning. Helping clients to symbolically represent their career and life biographies enabled them to reflect on past experiences and present situations. Symbolization seemed nurtured by a counselor's expectation that clients tell stories about their career and life. This was true for both counselors who conducted the Career Construction Interview

(Savickas, 2011) and for counselors who elicited Subjective Identity Forms (Guichard, 2008) corresponding to the career transition. The initial interview produced a “systematic evocative unfolding” (Watson & Rennie, 1994, p. 501) to help clients re-evolve experiences and explore vivid, concrete examples of their sources of self-construction and career construction. Counselors responded empathically to client micro-narratives and explored affective reactions to the evoked experiences.

Exploring the cognitive and affective reactions to symbolization seemed to almost immediately enable clients to expand their self-awareness and recognize the current perspective from which they viewed the career problem. As clients made contact with an inner frame of reference, they were able to articulate thoughts and express feelings more accurately as well as discuss their meaning. Thus symbolization supported a deeper understanding of experiences and enabled clients to clarify their meaning. As stated by one of the clients discussed by Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2016):

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

Several counselors used metaphors to convert vague ideas, feelings, and images into concrete symbols to explore. Encouraging clients to find their own metaphors helped them to access personal wisdom and free emotional expression. Lengelle, Meijers, and Hughes (2016) explained that metaphors “as messengers of meaning” prompted insights by directing clients’ attention to salient issues and suggesting meanings. They used the term *nudging metaphors* for circumscribed metaphors that counselors used to help clients symbolize experience.

4. Reflective self-examination

Following symbolic representation, clients may re-evaluate their experiences. Counselors who used the method of Life- and Career-Design Dialogues helped clients to examine highlighted dimensions of the previously symbolized Subjective Identity Forms. Counselors who used the method of Career Construction Counseling prompted client self-examination using the images, words, and meanings from the Career Construction Interview. In either case, counselors tried to keep the self-examination in the viewpoint framed by client response to how counseling might be useful to them. Cardoso et al. (2016) explained that encouraging clients in a compassionate manner to think about issues from that viewpoint clarified the personal meaning they attached to events in their lives, enhanced their self-understanding, improved their sense of self, and inspired forward movement. This reflection in the form of critical examination and appraisal broadened and deepened clients’ self-exploration. Counselors could hear clients rethinking in expressions of reflective efforts such as “It made me think”; “I started to think...”; “I think I made the link...”; “I realized that...”; or “I never thought of it that way.” Of course clients differed in how quickly they sensed connections. Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2016) described how the client named Helen was quick to relate different stories from her past to her current situation. In comparison, Maree (2016) more actively helped his clients to directly relate their micro-narratives from the Career Construction Interview to their current situation.

A main operation during self-examination seemed to be making links that increased the complexity of the self-narrative in terms of coherence and continuity. Connections seemed to be of two different types. The first type to appear tended to be connections between the micro-narratives, that is, a type of connecting with myself. A particularly powerful connection was linking role model traits to the problem and perspective revealed in the early recollections. This type of linking clearly increased coherence among stories. A second type of linking increased continuity by connecting past micro-narratives to the current situation, a type of recognizing patterns. These connections encouraged clients’ to examine and elaborate the causes and consequences of their current problem in making a career transition. As Cardoso et al. (2016) explained, linking past experiences to the present situation prompted clients to scrutinize the pros and cons of their own behavior. For example, Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2016) described how Indiana began to address her hidden pain of failing a medical entrance examination when commenting on the counselor’s reconstruction of her early recollection of falling off a bike. These links between past experiences and present circumstances seemed to provide a smooth transition to making new self-realizations using reflexivity that would become more global as they took center stage in the next phase of the performance model.

5. Reflexively making new realizations

In Life- and Career-Design Dialogues, Guichard (2008) suggested that this phase consists of a reorganization of the highlighted dimensions of Subjective identity Forms in order to respond to the client’s initial concern and articulate “restorative intentions”. In the approach of Career Construction Counseling, practitioners arranged responses to the five interview questions in a life portrait. This reorganization offered a new perspective on self and career. It highlighted a life theme and included, in the words of Lengelle et al. (2016), a *thread metaphor*. The counselor’s goal was to help clients envision their career transition from a new perspective and consider how the theme might shape their choices and plans.

As basic operations of meaning construction, both symbolic representation of experience and reflective self-examination focused clients on particulars of their situation. Building on these basic operations, clients were then ready to reflexively make new realizations. A client discussed by Cardoso et al. (2016) described this phase as searching for a “new order”. Results from the prior operations of symbolization and self-examination served as a “meaning bridge” (Watson & Rennie, 1994, p. 507) to reconstruct this new order. To actually perform this higher-level operation of reflexively making new realizations, counselors

encouraged clients to think about their career as a whole and arrange the micro-narratives of past experiences and present events to construct a macro-narrative or life portrait.

Results revealed that a client's narrative transformation begins with understanding the career problem in terms of life themes. These themes outline a possible pathway through disorienting and disconnecting events. A particularly helpful technique had counselors juxtapose micro-narratives to suggest possible ways in which they fit a macro-narrative theme or the part they played in patterning the story as a whole. Connecting these life themes to the current situation and future anticipations is a qualitatively different kind of linking than the linking performed as a part of self-examination. It shifts perspectives and cues emotional reactions. When perspectives shifted, emotions crested. Counselors responded to client emotions as a fulcrum for making and stabilizing new realizations and revising identity. As stated succinctly by [Lengelle et al. \(2016\)](#), "Before meaning may be reorganized and action engaged, feelings must change." The new perspective broadens and deepens self-understanding by attaching new meanings to past experiences and the present situation. It also revises the presenting problem in a way that fosters agency for reflexive choice making and moving into the future. New meanings for old problems engender thoughts of new possibilities.

For example, a client discussed by [Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius \(2016\)](#) changed perspectives from focusing on weaknesses in mathematics to realizing her many strengths in that subject and others. Thelma still feared choosing an option that her parents might not approve, but she knew by the end of the interview that the decision was hers to take. As Thelma's counselor said to her, "This is a story about departing from your parents" ([Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2016](#)). With this realization, the client became increasingly enthusiastic about her future.

In another example, the client Debbie described by [Reid et al. \(2016\)](#) proclaimed during the Interpersonal Process Recall session how the shift felt amazing.

Found stuff that I didn't know was there – amazing! The really powerful moment was the headline. When I had to provide that, I had to sort out the relevant issue. Quite a powerful experience – never had anything like that before.

[Reid et al. \(2016\)](#) concluded that clarification of meaning was the turning point for Debbie as she began to make sense of the emerging pattern and important life themes.

The client described by [Hartung and Vess \(2016\)](#) also noted that reflexively considering her current situation in light of an early recollection shifted her perspective. She explained during the Interpersonal Process Recall session that she shifted perspective when the counselor related her first early recollection to her current career situation. She said that viewing things from that perspective prompted a new realization that "just kind of got off into a flow and started to come together and make a lot of sense".

An increased awareness of the continuity and coherence in their life themes energized clients to address the tasks of reconstructing their career narratives and extending their insights into future possibilities. This deep sense-making prompted new realizations that enabled the emergence of new self-representations primed for purposeful actions in the real world. The gradual reconstruction of an identity narrative with clear life themes led to a sense of order that enabled clients to envision differently a life in the future.

6. Revisioning career identity

The clients' gradual transformation through the process of self-organization imposed greater narrative continuity and coherence on their vocational experiences. From revised perspectives, clients showed a revitalized sense of purpose for work and possibly other life roles. As clients articulated a revised identity, they considered what was at stake in the transition and generated alternative ways of managing role changes. Often, they articulated what [Lengelle et al. \(2016\)](#) called a *crystallizing metaphor* that served to stabilize new insights about how to move forward. In Life- and Career-Design Dialogues, [Guichard \(2008\)](#) refers to this phase as "Effective Translation and Affective Projection" during which counselors check that a client "is emotionally invested" in new identity forms and reinforce client statements of "likely action".

Counselors engaged in reflexive dialogues with clients to confirm and stabilize the emergence of revised and newly anticipated identities. In the words of [Pouyaud, Bangali, Cohen-Scali, Robinet, and Guichard \(2016\)](#), counselors fostered reflexivity in "stabilizing the self by referring to an image of the self that the person wishes to become". They gave the example of the counselor helping a client to anticipate how she could resolve her own concern by having her first identify *with* an occupational group and then identify herself acting *as* a member of that occupational group. Her reflexive identification with an occupational group thus moved from "they" to "I". Counselors further stabilize a revised identification with an occupational group by prompting clients to elaborate their anticipations to more clearly envision a possible future for the revised identity and form intentions to enact that identity.

Subjective commitment to and emotional investment in a revised identity energized feelings of self-determination, agency, and responsibility. As [Taylor and Savickas \(2016\)](#) explained, what had seemed out of control had come under control. The presenting problem was now described in a way that created a sense of being able to take agentic action, that is, behavior infused with meaning. A sense of retaking control took hold as clients expressed feelings of well-being and discussed implementing career plans. In closing the interventions, counselors encouraged clients to further stabilize the revised identity outside of counseling by seeking the validation of significant others. This means telling the new career narrative to family and friends with the hope of receiving their endorsement and even help. If family and friends do not support the new identity narrative, the individual may seek validation from the chosen academic or occupational community. If no audience recognizes the new identity, then it

is not an identity. It may be a self-narrative but without social validation it cannot be considered an identity. Of course the final step in the life-design interventions had clients begin to enact plans to bridge the career transition. The perspective in the revised career narrative steers action and, in turn, that action reinforces the new identity.

7. Life design intervention phases

Reading the Symposium articles from the perspective of [Watson and Rennie's \(1994\)](#) four phases of client operations proved quite useful. The perspective provided a framework in which to arrange the different ways authors charted and described the sequence of client operations during process of life-design interventions. As outlined in [Table 1](#), authors used diverse names for the four phases in life-design interventions. Despite this variation in labels, the process of life-design interventions follows a standard sequence of client operations as framed by [Watson and Rennie's \(1994\)](#) model of client operations and indicated by [Kolb's \(1984\)](#) experiential learning cycle. The process begins with addressing a client's *tension* by *constructing* micro-narratives that provide *symbolic representations of concrete experiences*. The authors used various terms, maybe not always synonymous, to further characterize this first phase. Combining their phrases, we might state that clients *constructed* a *sense* of their *I-positions*. The second phase involved a *deconstruction* of limiting ideas and false beliefs with *attention* concentrated on *reflective observation* and *self-examination*. Again combining phrases from various authors, we might state that counselors used *nudging metaphors* to help clients to *explore*, *sift*, and *broaden* their *I-positions*. The third phase involved producing new *intentions* by *reconstructing* a macro-narrative with *abstract conceptualizations* that beget *new realizations*. Combining phrases from different authors, we might state that clients used *thread metaphors* to *reorganize* and *focus* on themes in their *meta-positions*. And finally, client and counselor *co-construct* an action plan that extends *revisioning* of identity through *active experimentation* in the real world. Combining phrases from different authors, we could state that clients use *crystallizing metaphors* to *translate*, *understand*, and *project* from *promoter positions* their revised identities into the future. During the first two phases in life-design interventions, reflection seemed dominant while during the last two phases reflexivity dominated. During all four phases of intervention, maintaining the relationship was the core element that sustained reflection and reflexivity to promote sense making and identity reconstruction.

8. Reflection versus reflexivity

Thinking about the results reported in the Symposium articles suggests that reflective self-examination to assess one's position may be able to restore stability through making choices and commitments but only within the client's current perspective. Change may occur yet it is consistent with a client's assumptions, beliefs, and roles. This represents first-order change that also may be achieved by career interventions such as vocational guidance and occupational placement. However, these services may be insufficient to address the need for significant change. Novel situations and substantial career transitions may require that clients engage in reflexivity to move to a new perspective. A new vantage point that views the adaptive challenge from a higher order of self-organization may be required to foster transformative change in thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This second-order change is inherently emotional, as suggested by several of the case reports in the Symposium articles. As part of changing perspective, reflexive thought extracts intentions when reflective analysis alone fails. Reflexivity seems to address major transitions by re-arranging what is already known into a new perspective and self-organization. As the *unthought known* emerges through reflexivity, it may shape new meaning and illuminate future possibilities. It is reflexivity that orders experience, constructs meaning, and forms intentions. In turn, this revision of identity heightens agency and clarifies choice alternatives thereby inspiring clients to enact plans and move into the future.

If reflection and reflexivity prompt change, what prompts reflection and reflexivity? The answer has long been known to counselors. When clients believe that they are being heard and feel validated, they reflect more deeply. A safe environment, the working alliance, strategic questioning, attunement to client feelings, empathic responding, and encouragement facilitated client reflection and reflexivity. The main element that changes during life-design interventions is the perspective clients take on the career transition. The change in perspective increased self-awareness, clarified needs, revised career narratives, energized planning, and prompted action.

Table 1

Diverse terms for the four phases in life-design interventions.

Client operations Watson and Rennie (1994)	Client experience Savickas (2015)	Learning cycle Kolb (1984)	Career Construction Counseling Savickas (2011)	Life- & Career Design Dialogues Guichard (2008)	Metaphors Lengelle et al. (2016)	Career learning Law (1996)	Internal dialogues Meijers and Lengelle (2012)
Symbolic representation	Tension	Concrete experience	Construct	Construct		Sense	I-positions
Reflexive self-examination	Attention	Reflective observation	Deconstruct	Explore	Nudge	Sift	Expanded I-positions
New realizations	Intention	Abstract conceptualization	Reconstruct	Reorganize	Thread	Focus	Meta-position
Revisioning self	Extension	Active experimentation	Co-construct	Translate & project	Crystallize	Understand	Promoter position

9. Conclusion

The articles in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life-Design Interventions have elaborated theorizing about the processes of life-designing and made them researchable within current narrative frameworks. Maybe more importantly, they have helped to shape a language for identifying and examining the processes that foster meaning making and identity reconstruction, especially the differences between reflection and reflexivity.

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