

Career as Story:
Explorations Using the Narrative Paradigm

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Abstract

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Viewing a career as analogous to a story allows us to develop innovative methods for career counseling. Using the "career as story" analogy, career counseling may be conceptualized as a process of storying and restorying a client's vocational experience. Counselors can help clients to interpret life and career by viewing the person as a text. Like hermeneutical scholars who interpret the meaning of a literary passage from the corpus of the work, career counselors may interpret a client's interests, abilities, and work values as an expression of a career pattern or central life theme.

This approach to career counseling helps clients to recite and develop narrative accounts of their vocational lives. These narratives serve to sum up meaning in the manner of a satisfying story. Acting as co-authors and editors of these narratives, counselors can help clients (1) authorize their careers by narrating a coherent, continuous, and credible story, (2) invest career with meaning by identifying themes and tensions in the story line, and (3) learn the skills needed to perform the next episode in the story.

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The dichotomy between the objective and subjective perspectives on clients' vocational choices may be used to analyze the limitations of current career counseling techniques. The objective view focuses on conceptions of the client formed by observers whereas the subjective view focuses on apprehending the client's conception of his or her personal experience. Although the English language does not explicitly recognize this distinction, other languages do. For example, in German personlichkeit denotes the actor's interpersonal style and the impression that she or he makes on others whereas personalitat denotes the actor's understanding of the reasons for her or his behavior (MacKinnon, 1944). In this paper, "vocational" denotes the objective perspective. We use "career" to denote the subjective perspective, following Hughes (1958, p. 63) definition of subjective career as a perspective in which people see their lives as a whole and interpret the meaning of their attributes, actions, and things which happen to them.

The Objective Perspective

Vocational guidance operates from the objective perspective. Guidance counselors help clients become more realistic and rational in making vocational choices. Vocational guidance always has been based on a community's consensually valid attempts to objectively explain individual differences in behavioral dispositions. Objective explanations use the common-sense of the group, not the private-sense of individuals.

Trait theory of individual differences sustains the contemporary practice of vocational guidance. Trait theory attributes recurring uniformities in person's social behavior to personality structure. The underlying dimensions that structure behavioral clusters are called traits.

Scientific and lay observers of an actor encode their impressions of the actor's social conduct in trait vocabularies. For example, an observer might attribute a person's behavior to the trait of honesty. According to Hogan (1983, p. 60), "the primary function of trait ascription is to evaluate other people, specifically, to evaluate their potential as resources for the group." Thus, in a group that divides labor among its members, traits can be used to assign work roles.

Contemporary practitioners of vocational guidance operationalize the trait theory approach to objective vocational guidance with actuarial methods. The counselor as actuary estimates the probabilities of a client succeeding in various occupations. Counselors base these estimates on data gathered through assessment of the client with psychometric instruments that objectively measure abilities and interests. After matching a client's ability test and interest inventory results to aptitude and interest patterns that characterize various occupations, counselors can recommend fitting occupational levels and fields to the client.

The Subjective Perspective

Career counseling operates from the subjective perspective. It helps clients understand their behavior from their own point of view. When operating from the objective perspective, the counselor acts authoritatively as a representative of the community and its common-sense. When operating from the subjective perspective, the counselor elicits clients' subjective conceptions of themselves and the world and acts as interpreter to help clients understand their selves and the meaning they give to their lives. The counselor elicits occupational possibilities, not through traits, but through facilitating self-exploration and interpreting meaning. These procedures help

clients acknowledge and discuss unexamined (or unconscious) ideas and feelings they have about making vocational choices. These personal ideas and feelings compose the client's private-sense conceptions about the meaning of self, work, and life.

Private-sense cannot comprehend traits as an explanation of vocational behavior. Individuals do not use differences between themselves and others to explain their behavior to themselves. In fact, individual difference variables do not exist for individuals. Without objective feedback from teachers or counselors, people do not ordinarily sense their position relative to other people across a taxonomy of traits. What they do sense is their own needs and goals. Individuals comprehend these needs and goals as the reason for their behavior. Purpose, not traits, structure actors' causal explanations. The behavioral clusters, which from the objective perspective are explained by traits, are explained by actors as intentional action. Rather than clusters, these behaviors are perceived as patterns which over time reveal purpose.

Life pattern theory sustains contemporary career counseling. At mid-century, Super (1954) elaborated the subjective perspective on career counseling by developing "career pattern counseling." Super devised career pattern theory as an extension of life pattern theory. Essentially, the theory of life patterns states that analysis of an individual's life history reveals tendencies and patterns that can characterize that life story. The life history approach to career pattern counseling seeks to aid the individual by identifying past and probable future patterns of development. Super developed a version of life history method which he called "extrapolation based on thematic analysis." Essentially, this method enables counselors to

identify life themes by analyzing a case history. When using the thematic-extrapolation method to clinically study clients and their development, counselors act more like biographers than actuaries (Savickas, 1988).

The purpose of combining the objective and subjective perspectives in career counseling is to help clients find socially viable (objective) and personally suitable (subjective) vocational opportunities to develop their life themes through work. Viewing clients from both the objective and subjective perspectives allows counselors to consider aptitudes and interests in a matrix of life experience (Berg, 1954). Counselors who see clients from both perspectives have a better picture of clients' vocational development and career decision making. With this picture, counselors can do more than objectively describe how a client compares to the group and translate the client's interests and abilities into fitting occupations. Counselors can also subjectively explain clients' interests and abilities, not as possessions, but as solutions to problems of growing up (Carter, 1940). By combining trait descriptions and life theme explanations of interests, counselors may more effectively clarify clients' choices and enhance their ability to decide.

Recent developments in the basic science of psychology have provided applied psychologists with a new perspective that encourages the further development of career pattern counseling. These recent developments involve the importance of narratives in thinking, memory, and language. Bruner (1986) summarized many of these developments as part of his comparison of propositional and narrative modes of thought. He described propositional thought as seeking to abstract and analyze common elements and narrative thought as seeking to establish connections or interdependence among elements.

Propositional thought emphasizes context independence whereas narrative thought emphasizes context sensitivity. Thinking about the occupational careers of individual using narrative thought (subjective) rather than propositional thought (objective) begets numerous new possibilities, not the least of which involves regarding an individual's career as a story.

Career as Story

Viewing a career as analogous to a story allows us to develop innovative methods for career counseling. Using the "career as story" analogy, career counseling may be conceptualized as a process of storying and restorying a client's vocational experience. Counselors can help clients to interpret life and career by viewing the person as a text. Like hermeneutical scholars (Young & Collin, 1988) who interpret the meaning of a literary passage from the corpus of the work, career counselors may interpret a client's interests, abilities, and work values as an expression of a career pattern or central life theme.

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Narrating a story creates self-knowledge. We know ourselves more through stories than through theories. Stories give depth to our experience and allow us to authorize our lives by speaking openly about them. Narratives present kernels of experience that seem formative to the teller. The

narratives reveal purposeful activity and causal attributions. The process of telling a story serves as an integrative force in self-awareness because storytelling organizes the cognitive field. The key organizational principle involves construing the present in terms of felt realities from the past. This organization allows clients and counselors to recognize substantive patterns. The self-reflective use of pattern recognition fosters insight and reinterpretation, that is, reorganization of meaning.

Pattern recognition is a key outcome of story telling. Narratives allow us to perceive connections and thus make sense or meaning of our experiences. Stories illustrate overall themes and tensions. By relating these themes to our overall goals, people make meaning. Empirical events gain meaning only when interpreted through a conceptual framework, in this case, career themes and goals. When counselors relate client themes to client goals, they begin to understand how work is a way of making up for what was missing in childhood (Ochberg, 1988; Ochberg & Gergen, 1990) and interests are solutions to problems in growing up (Carter, 1940). By reinterpreting themes and tensions, clients change or re-author themselves.

Narrative retelling allows personal transformation. Counselors can foster this transformation by focusing attention on key experiences that clarify the emerging drama. Counselors then help clients to reconsider these key experience in light of new information. Clients can then change themselves by revising their stories to be more coherent, continuous, clear, and credible. Clients can write new plots, script new destinies, and improve their coping repertoire by changing their expectations and thus their behavior. For example, counselors can help clients to increase their occupational alternatives by heightening client awareness of gender

imperatives in their narratives. Stories are typically gendered along the lines of the female homemaker and the male provisioner. Even narrative structure differs in that masculine stories seem to follow a single line while feminine stories seem to follow multiple and interacting lines.

In general, techniques for helping clients to clarify and improve their stories, and thereby careers, include extracting vocational narratives, identifying themes and tension, constructing a healthier life story, and designing the personal future. In particular career counselors may:

- *elicit stories about heros/heroines, adventures, school, struggles, mottos, and predictions about the future (Savickas, 1989)
- *consider story elements including the hero/heroine, friends, enemies, acts, tools, purposes, scenes
- *plot events of the client's life and identify themes and tensions
- *analyze themes as suggested by Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) to determine if themes are discovered or accepted, abstract or concrete, personal or general, clear or ambiguous, essential or external
- *spot strategic spots at which ambiguities arise
- *discuss themes as adaptive systems for coping
- *generate a multiple perspective
- *encourage "I" statements in narratives
- *prompt metaphors and dramatic language in narratives
- *identify story parts that expectations or specifications of others
- *elicit new stories that incorporate previously neglected aspects of lived experience

- *help clients become self-conscious of their role as meaning makers when they form and tell stories
- *invite retelling of stories
- *edit healthier stories that correct mistakes, settle accounts, and come to terms with parents, siblings, and friends
- *create image of life story that enhances self-esteem
- *plot, design, script future by writing a future autobiography

An Example of Using Narratives in Career Counseling

One systematic methods for using the narrative paradigm in career counseling is the career-style interview (Savickas, 1989). The career-style interview consists of stimulus questions that seem valid to career counseling clients and elicit from them opinions and experiences relevant to their career choices. The questions elicit life goal and style information that reveal how clients think an interest can solve a problem or make them more complete. The stimulus questions are sequenced into a structured career-style interview. The topics flow smoothly and keep clients actively engaged in self-exploration while they describe themselves for the counselor. The stimulus questions deal with: (1) role models, (2) books, (3) magazines, (4) leisure activities, (5) school subjects, (6) mottos, (7) ambitions, and (8) decisions.

The first topic, role models, illustrates how the career-style method works. Counselors begin the career-style interview by investigating a client's predicament in life as portrayed by role models. To identify a client's role models, the counselor might say "Whom did you admire when you were growing up?" If clients do not understand, then the counselor can ask them whom they respected a lot, maybe even enough to imitate. With clients

who cannot think of anyone, the counselor may suggest that it does not have to be a famous person or fictional character. This often leads a client to name a relative or family member. After the client has named one model, the counselor asks for two other models. When the client has named three models, the counselor asks in turn for each model, "What did you admire about this person?" It sometimes takes prodding, so the counselor may ask the client to "just tell me about the person. What were they like?" The counselor closes this first topic by asking for each model, "How are you like this person and how are you different from this person?"

It is not unusual for a client to name a famous animal as a model. In fact, many counselors have said that they admired Lassie. Lassie was always able to help out and save the day. A crisis counselor said he admired Mighty Mouse for much the same reasons. A gentle and kind social worker reported that his hero was Ferdinand the Bull. He went on to explain what that meant to him in relation to his alcoholic father. Two different clients admired Peter Pan. Both clients had trouble accepting adult responsibilities and eventually chose occupations in which their childlike life styles were assets.

As clients discuss their models, counselors should concentrate on what clients admire about their models more than whom they admire. In attending to who, counselors rely on stereotypes and what the model means to them. I recall a clear example of this mistake. I was doing a public demonstration of counseling with a disadvantaged student who said that he admired a football player. Several counselors in the audience jumped to the conclusion that the young man viewed professional athletics as his way out of the ghetto. In explaining why he admired the athlete, the young man told several stories demonstrating how the athlete was independent, artistic, and manly. This

athlete modeled for him the self-confidence, independence, and vision that corresponded to his secret dream of being an architect. The young man chose this model because the athlete showed him that a person can be artistic without being effeminate. The athlete modeled a way for the young man to accept his mother's encouragement to be artistic and reject his father's admonition that, if he did, he would become homosexual.

As the client discusses role models, the counselor should think of what the model implies to form follow-up questions. Effective follow-up questions express inferences, not interpretations, so clients find them thought provoking and occasionally humorous. For example, someone who admires the Lone Ranger could be asked, "Are you a loner?" "Do you have a Tonto?" or "Do you like secrets?" and so on. The client's answers to follow-up questions increases the counselor's understanding of the client's career style. In talking about their models, clients describe themselves. A model shares the client's plight yet has found a way out of the predicament. In responding to questions about models, clients tell counselors about the problems that they wish to solve above all else. Thus counselors may identify the problems which structure clients' goals as well as the means that they use to move toward these goals. In other words, a client's model identifies a central life goal, articulates and labels the client's central concern, and reveals what the client thinks it will take to overcome that problem.

Conclusion

Counselors can use the narrative paradigm to elaborate the classic matching model in at least four ways: (1) to expand the core construct of fit to include belongingness, (2) to focus on uniqueness as well as similarity to other people, (3) to explain how people use the interests that they possess, and, and (4) to further explicate the career decision-making process.

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