

CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Career construction theory provides a way of thinking about how individuals choose and use work. The theory presents a model for comprehending vocational behavior across the life-cycle as well as methods and materials that career counselors use to help clients make vocational choices and maintain successful and satisfying work lives.

It seeks to be comprehensive in its purview by taking three perspectives on vocational behavior: the differential, developmental, and dynamic. From the perspective of individual differences psychology, it examines the content of vocational personality types and *what* different people prefer to do. From the perspective of developmental psychology, it examines the process of psychosocial adaptation and *how* individuals cope with vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas. From the perspective of narrative psychology, it examines the dynamics by which life themes impose meaning on vocational behavior and *why* individuals fit work into their lives in distinct ways. In coordination, the three perspectives enable counselors and researchers to survey how individuals construct their careers by using life themes to integrate the self-organization of personality and the self-extension of career adaptability into a self-defining whole that animates work, directs occupational choice, and shapes vocational adjustment.

RATIONALE

Career construction theory is one of many career theories that seek to explain occupational choice and work adjustment, each interrogating a different aspect of vocational behavior. Career theories that have risen to prominence have done so because they effectively address important questions. For example, the model of person-environment fit emerged early in the 20th century to address the question of how to match workers to work. The model of vocational development emerged in the middle of the 20th century to address the question of how to advance a career in one organization or profession. These theories of vocational personality types and vocational development tasks remain useful today when considering how to match workers to work and develop a career in an organization. However, the global economy of the 21st century poses new

questions about career, especially the question of how individuals can negotiate a lifetime of job changes without losing their sense of self and social identity.

Career construction theory responds to the needs of today's mobile workers who may feel fragmented and confused as they encounter a restructuring of occupations, transformation of the labor force, and multicultural imperatives. This fundamental reshaping of the work world is making it increasingly difficult to comprehend careers with just person-environment and vocational development models that emphasize commitment and stability rather than flexibility and mobility. The new job market in our unsettled economy calls for viewing career not as a lifetime commitment to one employer but as selling services and skills to a series of employers who need projects completed. In negotiating each new project, the prospective employee usually concentrates on salary yet also seeks to make the work meaningful, control the work environment, balance work-family responsibilities, and train for the next job.

While the form of career changes from stability to mobility to reflect the labor needs of post-industrial societies, career construction theory seeks to retain and renovate the best concepts and research from the 20th century career models for use in the 21st century. For example, instead of measuring personality traits as realist concepts and trying to prove construct validity, the theory concentrates on how individuals use what they have. In replacing scores with stories, career construction theory focuses on how individuals use their vocational personality to adapt to a sequence of job changes while remaining faithful to oneself and recognizable by others. The theory does this by focusing on the meaning that structures an individual's career as it plays out across the ten or more different jobs that a worker today can expect to occupy during her or his work life.

LIFE THEMES

Career construction theory, simply stated, holds that individuals build their careers by imposing meaning on vocational behavior. Personality types and developmental transitions deal with what a person has done and how they have done it. However, they do not address the question of

why they do what they do, nor do they focus on the spirit that animates nor the values that guide the manifold choices and adjustments that build a career. Thus, career construction theory emphasizes the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals impose meaning and direction on their vocational behavior. It uses social constructionism as a meta-theory with which to reconceptualize vocational personality types and vocational development tasks as processes that have possibilities, not realities that predict the future. From a constructionist viewpoint, career, or more precisely subjective career, denotes a moving perspective that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by weaving them into a pattern that portrays a life theme. Thus, the subjective career that guides, regulates, and sustains vocational behavior emerges from an active process of making meaning, not discovering preexisting facts.

The life theme component of career construction theory addresses the subject matter of work life and focuses on the *why* of vocational behavior. Career stories reveal the themes that individuals use to make meaningful choices and adjust to work roles. By dealing with the *why* of life themes along with the *what* of personality types and the *how* of career adaptability, career construction seeks to be comprehensive in its purview. Although the content of personality and process of adaptation are both important, studying vocational personality and career adaptability as separate variables misses the dynamics that integrate personality and adaptability into a self-defined whole. The essential meaning of a career, and the dynamics of its construction, are revealed in self-defining stories about the vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas that an individual has faced. In chronicling the recursive interplay between self and society, career stories explain why individuals make the choices that they do and the private meaning that guides these choices. From these prototypical stories about work life, counselors attempt to comprehend the life themes that construct careers and understand the motives and meaning that pattern work life.

The life theme component of career construction theory emerged from Donald E. Super's postulate that in expressing vocational preferences, individuals put into occupational terminology their ideas of the kind of people they are; that in entering an occupation, they seek to implement a concept of themselves; and that after stabilizing in an occupation, they seek to realize their

potential and preserve self-esteem. This core postulate leads to the conceptualization of occupational choice as implementing a self-concept, work as a manifestation of selfhood, and vocational development as a continuing process of improving the match between the self and situation. From this perspective on the self, work provides a context for human development and an important location in each individual's life, a place that matters.

The life theme perspective highlights the view that careers are about *matter*ing. Counseling for career construction aims to help clients understand how their life project matters to themselves and to other people. In career construction theory, the theme is what matters in the life story. It consists of what is at stake in that person's life. On the one hand, the theme matters to individuals in that it gives meaning and purpose to their work. It makes them care about what they do. On the other hand, what they do and contribute to society matters to other people. The belief that what they do matters to others sharpens identity and promotes a sense of social meaning and relatedness. What individuals choose to do is the subject matter of vocational personality.

VOCATIONAL PERSONALITY

Vocational personality refers to an individual's career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests. Individuals form personalities in their families of origin and develop these personalities in the neighborhood and school as they prepare to eventually enter the work world. Before these characteristics are expressed in occupations, they are rehearsed in activities such as household chores, games, hobbies, reading, and studying.

Career construction theory prefers to view interests and other career-related "traits" as strategies for adapting rather than as realist categories. Concepts such as interests should not be reified as factors or traits. They do not reside within an individual and they cannot be excavated from within by interest inventories. They should not be treated as objects by counselors; they are verbs not nouns. Career-related abilities, interests, and values are relational phenomena that reflect socially-constituted meanings. They are dynamic processes that present possibilities, not stable traits that predict the future. From this perspective, individuals can adopt or drop selected strategies as situations call for them. Of course, long-practiced strategies do coalesce into a tested style. This style can be compared to that of other people to form types or groups, but these socially-constructed categories should not be privileged as

anything more than similarities.

Career construction theory asserts that vocational personality types and occupational interests are simply *resemblances* to socially-constructed clusters of attitudes and skills. They have no reality or truth value outside themselves because they depend on the social constructions of time, place and culture that support them. Regulated similarities in work environments produce vocational personality types and occupational groups from among individuals with heterogeneous potentials. Thus, career construction theory regards vocational personality types and occupational interests as relational phenomena that reflect emergent and socially-constituted meanings. For this reason, career construction theory views vocational personality as an individual's *reputation* among a group of people. Accordingly, the theory concentrates on what individuals can become in doing work, not what they are before they go to work. Work, as a context for human development, provides the outer form of something intensely private; it is the bridge between public and private. Crossing the bridge between self and society is called adaptation.

CAREER ADAPTABILITY

In concert with life themes and vocational personality, the third central component in career construction theory is career adaptability. Life themes guide the expression of personality in work, while the expression itself is managed by the process of career adaptation. Viewing career construction as a series of attempts to implement a self-concept in social roles focuses attention on adaptation to a series of transitions from school to work, from job to job, and from occupation to occupation. Career construction theory views adaptation to these transitions as fostered by five principal types of behaviors: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. These constructive activities form a cycle of adaptation that is periodically repeated as new transitions appear on the horizon. As each transition approaches, individuals can adapt more effectively if they meet the change with growing awareness, information-seeking followed by informed decision making, trial behaviors leading to a stable commitment projected forward for a certain time period, active role management, and eventually forward-looking deceleration and disengagement. For example, an employee begins a new job with a period of growth in the new role, including exploration of the requirements, routines, and rewards of that role. Then she becomes established in the role, manages the role for a certain time period, and eventually disengages from it either

voluntarily when further growth readies her to change jobs or involuntarily when organizational changes make her position redundant. In post-industrial economies people do not work at one job for thirty years. New technology, globalization, and job redesign require workers to more actively construct their careers. They change jobs often and make frequent transitions, each time repeating the cycle of orientation, exploration, stabilization, management, and disengagement. The ability to adapt to new circumstances is enhanced by certain coping resources for solving the unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas.

In considering adaptability, career construction theory highlights a set of specific attitudes, beliefs, and competencies – the ABCs of career construction-- which shape the actual problem-solving strategies and coping behaviors that individuals use to synthesize their vocational self-concepts with work roles. These variables are outlined in Table 1. The ABCs are grouped into four dimensions of adaptability: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Thus, the adaptive individual is conceptualized as (a) becoming *concerned* about the vocational future, (b) increasing personal *control* over one's vocational future, (c) displaying *curiosity* by exploring possible selves and future scenarios, and (d) strengthening the *confidence* to pursue one's aspirations. Increasing a client's career adaptability is a central goal in the goal of career construction counseling.

COUNSELING FOR CAREER CONSTRUCTION

Counseling for career construction begins with an interview that poses a uniform set of questions to a client. The *Career Style Interview*, which appears in the appendix, elicits self-defining stories that enable counselors to identify and appreciate the thematic unity in a client's life. In addition to revealing the life theme, data from a *Career Style Interview* also manifest the client's vocational personality and career adaptability.

It is critical that neither the counselor nor the client view the career stories as determining the future; instead, they should view storying as an active attempt at making meaning and shaping the future. The stories guide adaptation by evaluating opportunities and constraints as well as by using vocational personality traits to address tasks, transitions, and traumas. In telling their stories, clients are remembering the past in a way that constructs a possible future. Clients seem to tell counselors 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 reconstruct the past so that prior events support current choices and lay the groundwork for future moves. This narrative truth often differs from historical truth because it fictionalizes the past in order to preserve dispositional continuity and coherence in the face of psychosocial change.

In attempting to discern the life theme while listening to an individual's career stories, counselors and researchers can become disoriented by the numerous particulars of a life. To prevent becoming confused by a client's complexities and contradictions, they can listen not for the facts but for the glue that holds the facts together as they try to hear the theme or secret that makes a whole of the life. Arranging the seemingly random actions and incidents reported in career stories into a plot can be done in many ways. Career construction theory proposes for this purpose that the listener try to hear the quintessence of the stories a client tells. Counselors and researchers approach this task by assuming that the archetypal theme of career construction involves turning a personal preoccupation into a public occupation. As they listen to a client narrate his or her stories, they concentrate on identifying and understanding his or her personal paradigm for turning essence into interest, tension into intention, and obsession into profession. The progress narrative in the 20th century career model that told about climbing the occupational ladder is thus transformed into a progress narrative that tells how individuals can use work to actively master what they have passively suffered and thus move from a felt minus to a perceived plus. Thus, in its counseling application, career construction theory assists clients to fully inhabit their lives and become more complete as they sustain themselves and contribute to their communities.

A Case Study: Elaine

As I begin counseling for career construction, I concentrate on comprehending and appreciating the life themes in a client's career stories. While much has been written about how to hear the themes in career stories, my favorite technique for identifying life themes is to concentrate on how the individual seeks to turn a preoccupation into an occupation. I look for the core value and listen for the heartbeat of career. To do this I elicit a uniform set of stories from clients by a structured interview called the *Career Style Interview* (Savickas, 1998). I have published a manual for this assessment technique earlier (Savickas, 1998) which practicum students might find

useful. The interview is designed to elicit self-defining stories that allow counselors to identify the style that individuals impose on their characters and the thematic unity resulting from etching these styles in the psychosocial matrix of personality in work roles. Data from a *Career Style Interview* also clearly manifest a client's vocational personality type and career adaptability. In several publications I have written about how to use the *Career Style Interview* and presented brief case studies (Savickas, 1988, 1989, 1995a, 1995b, 1997), so I will not belabor that herein. Instead, I will now present a more complete case study, first using the results of a *Career Style Interview* to assess vocational personality type, career adaptability, and life theme and then describing how I used this assessment in counseling to help the client narrate a livable career story that enabled her to make educational and vocational choices and then enact roles that made her feel more complete.

Meeting Elaine

Elaine's mother called me to arrange for career counseling with her daughter. Her mother stated that Elaine had already seen two career counselors but they had not been very good. When I asked what that meant, she explained that they both had failed to convince her daughter to major in biology and go to medical school. I agreed to counsel with Elaine only if Elaine called for an appointment and if I worked with Elaine, not for her mother.

When I first met Elaine she was a 20 year old, full-time college student who said that she could not decide on a major, although her mother urged her to declare pre-med. She lived at home and commuted to campus each day. She guessed she would major in pre-med and go on to medical school but she was unsure of this right now. She reported that she had been to her college counseling center yet now feels more undecided after working with a counselor there. She wants me to help her explore whether medicine is the right choice for her. She has just completed the fall semester of her sophomore year and in the spring must declare her major. She sometimes thinks engineering would be good for her, and she took an engineering class during the fall semester. She thought that maybe chemical engineering would be good, but civil engineering is easier. She has requested information from another college where they have better integrated computers into their chemical engineering curriculum. She was attracted by computers and liked the idea that if she transferred to that college she could live in a dorm. I asked her the questions listed on the *Career Style Interview* form that appears in Table 3. The notes I recorded on the form are presented next.

Career Style Interview with Elaine

How can I be useful to you in constructing your career?

I do not know why I can't choose a major. I need help in making a choice.

Three role models:

- Ann of Green Gables = spirit; temper (I hide mine); set goals and goes after them; does what she wants; has integrity; has fun.
- Wrinkle in Time* = showdown against creatures trying to take over their minds. She thought of ways to stick together and fight them.
- Laura, *Little House on the Prairie* = wild ideas of things to do; compete, outdo each other; end up on the ground fighting.

Magazines:

- Vogue = fashion
- Business Week = the advertising campaigns
- Details = men's clothing

Favorite Television Show:

- Laverne and Shirley = they did things off the norm, but not getting into trouble

Favorite Book:

- The Search of Mary Kay Malloy = it is the story of an Irish girl and her voyage to America by herself.

Hobbies:

- Movies
- Shop in thrift stores for fashionable clothes
- Sewing (cross-stitch) while I watch television so that I do not waste time. You can make what you want, not what other people have. I like to look at the finished product.
- Talking to people

Favorite Sayings:

- "I am curious about things." Curious George
- "Do it well" - Parents meant nearly perfect and they checked it. Do it wrong and you have to redo it until it is right.

What were your favorite subjects in school?

- Math because you learn the right way to do things and to problem solve for yourself. I hated history because you studied unimportant facts and dates. I also hated geography because you had to memorize.

Three early recollections with headlines:

#1 Little girl annoyed because she must sit still

Going to Disneyland with grandparents and uncle and his girlfriend. I was in the back of the camper trying to sing and dance for my grandmother. She told me to sit down so I

would not get hurt. I got on uncle's girlfriend's nerves by trying to talk to her. Tried to talk but she did not think I should move around at the same time.

#2 Playful girl dreads speaking with relatives

I remember a family reunion at Grandma's (the other one). I was playing an old corn thing with my cousin. I did not know who most of the people were. Grandma made me stop playing and said I had to talk to the people because they knew who I was. Grandma said you kids behave.

#3 Mischievous child has fun at first or dog plan fails

This family that my parents met in England came to visit. I teased their son. He made fun of the curlers in my hair. The boy was chasing me all over the yard. So I ran by my dog where the boy could not get me but he threw a stick and hit me in the eye. His mother and my mother took me in the bedroom and cleaned my eye.

Following the completion of the *Career Style Interview*, I asked Elaine a few questions that occurred to me during that structured interview.

What were the circumstances during which your indecision was labeled?

I was getting bored in my classes. One of my professors noticed.

How does it feel to be undecided?

It feels okay now that I have accepted it. I am failing at what I should do (make a choice). Floating in space, no direction, all dark.

Of what does this feeling remind you?

Being out of control.

Tell me an incident in which you had this same feeling.

Feeling of uncontrol like when I am when depressed.

Tell me about it.

My girlfriend has way of triggering me. She is too emotional. When she has a fight with her boyfriend, she gets me depressed because of the things she says when she is depressed over relationships. She expresses what I cannot express. When she says it, I end up feeling my feelings.

Do you have any idea of what haunts you?

I am afraid to choose the wrong thing. I could make wrong choice. Then, I would not live up to other peoples' expectations.

Tell me part of your life story that is important to your career choice.

I was always undecided. In the second grade, I went to get new shoes. After I wore them to school one day, I would take them back and get a different pair. Boy who sat next to me thought I was rich because I had so many pairs of shoes but it was because I could not decide.

Elaine's Vocational Personality, Career Adaptability, and Life Themes

Career construction theory focuses on stories because it views language as the efficient means for building careers out of complex social interactions. Language and stories are construction tools for making meaning. 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 develop their self-concepts. 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 counselor. It is important that counselors help client's understand the implications of what they have said in telling their stories. This means relating the theme to the problems posed in 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. At the same time, constructivist counseling expands the language that a client has available to make meaning out of experience. It offers clients the logical language of the RIASEC model as well as the dramatic language of stories and the symbolic language of poetry. Helping clients to enlarge their vocabulary of self increases their ability to story their experience and to understand and communicate who they are and what they seek.

Every counselor can listen to Elaine's stories and hear them through the amplifier of their favorite career theory. A counselor can listen for the melody of self-efficacy (Betz, 2000), the variations of different RIASEC types (Holland, 1997), or the song of career beliefs (Krumboltz & Vosvick, 1996). Nevertheless, it may be useful to demonstrate the interpretive routine used by counselors who try to hear how clients construct their careers. Like everyone else, Elaine's full story would require a novel. So this demonstration will not be exhaustive, or even comprehensive. It will highlight only a few representative incidents in Elaine's story to illustrate seven "tricks of the trade" in counseling for career construction.

First, I begin to make sense of Elaine's stories by reviewing how she wants to use the counseling experience. Her goals frame my analysis of the stories and the counseling to follow. They provide the perspective from which to view the stories. In response to my introductory question "How can I be useful to you in constructing your

career?" Elaine had said that she did not know why she cannot choose a major and she would like help in making a choice. This gives us two points of reference. She wants the counselor to help her understand why she cannot choose as well as to move her closer to making a choice. So in reviewing her career stories, I keep on the lookout for her experiences with and views of decision making. I am particularly interested in how decision making relates to her life themes. Of course, I also note that in terms of career adaptability, she may benefit from increasing her sense of career control.

Second, I look for the verbs in her early recollections. I start with the first verb in the first story, having learned that this is a particularly important form of movement in the life of the client. In Elaine's first recollection, the first verb is "going." To me this means that she wants to move, to be on the go, and to travel. I then look in the remaining stories for other evidence to support this idea. I note the phrases "moving around" and "dancing" in the first recollection and I find further support in her favorite book, which tells the story of a girl's journey to another country. Other verbs in her early recollections stand out by their repetition. "Playing" and "singing" seem important to her. She is enthusiastic about life. Also "try" appears three times in the first recollection, suggesting that she is industrious and persistent in pursuing difficult goals. "Talking" appears in the first two recollections, so she likes to communicate. And finally, in the first two recollections adult women tell her to sit down and stop playing. I start to see the tension in her life between wanting to be on the go and being told to sit still. Of course there is much more in her stories yet this is enough to get started. It is important to remember that these memories are not necessarily reasons for her behavior, she has constructed them to reflect her current struggle. The past takes lessons from the present, reshaping itself to fit current needs. This is why career stories, in addition to reflecting the life theme, almost always directly express the central issue now being faced by the client. From the many available stories, each reflecting the same themes, clients tell those that they themselves need to hear.

Third, I look at the headlines Elaine had written for each of her three recollections. These headlines came from my asking her to pretend that each story was going to appear in the newspaper and it needed a catchy headline, one that includes a verb. These headlines are rhetorical compressions that express the gist of her story. From Elaine's point of view, she is a "little girl" who is annoyed because powerful others stop her from enthusiastically

pursuing her dreams. They want her to stay put where they place her and she dreads talking to them about her needs. She knows that she can be mischievous and irritate them, yet understands that this negative plan will fail in the long run. It is worthwhile to read these plot lines in two ways. On the one hand, they reveal more about the life theme that will shape her career. On the other hand, they indicate in the here and now the problem she wants to work on in counseling and what she expects from the counselor. She wants a counselor to encourage her movement and her gusto for life, teach her to speak up for herself, and devise a plan that will not fail.

Fourth, I want to understand how Elaine is attempting to solve her problems in constructing a career and how occupations can help her grow up and actively master the problems she has faced. I seek to draw the line from preoccupation to occupation that is implicit in her stories, and that is the essence of the life theme. To do this, I compare the first early recollection to her role models. The early recollection portrays the pain and problem while the role models propose an ego ideal and tentative solution. In Elaine's case, the first story is about a playful girl being told to sit still and do as she is told. This, of course, resonates to her current dilemma--sitting still as her mother tells her to major in pre-med. The sitting still can be her metaphor for indecision.

Fifth, to see the plan she has in mind, I look to who she has chosen as models for self-design. As the architect of her own character, she has selected them as blueprints because they have solved the problems she herself now faces. Elaine has incorporated these key figures as ego ideals, imitated some of their salient behaviors, and now identifies with them. How she describes them reveals key ingredients in her self-concept and articulates her psychosocial identity. More than that, the descriptions serve as goals she has set for herself. In Elaine's stories, the key figures model spirit, enthusiasm, playfulness, goals, competitiveness, persistence, playfulness, temper, fighting wrong-headed authority, and enlisting compatriots in these battles. These qualities are reaffirmed in her other stories. She is not frightened by wild ideas and doing things off the norm as long as they are fun and do not cause trouble. She is curious and definitely an independent problem solver. She is neat and likes to do things well. She enjoys fashion, but maybe in a conventional and business-like way.

Sixth, I profile her career adaptability. After reviewing the coping strategies in her stories, I concluded that she is strongly concerned about the future, shows

curiosity about it, and could use a little more confidence in her ability to make it happen-- but this is due more to perfectionistic tendencies than to a lack of self-esteem. The major deficit in the profile, of course, is a healthy sense of career control. Indecision is her "try" at wrestling her mind away from powerful others who want to make it up for her. Ownership of her career is at stake, and she is ready to fight for it now. She just needs a plan and some encouragement. I will start by trying to help Elaine view her indecision as a strength, not a weakness. It is her way of fighting powerful creatures who are trying to control her career.

Seventh, I appraise Elaine's vocational personality. I do this by looking at her stories through the lens of Holland's RIASEC hexagon. Looking through these six-sided lenses, I see that she most resembles the Investigative type (a curious problem solver who likes math and science). She next most resembles the Conventional type (likes teams, partners, caution, cleanliness, norms). In the middle falls resemblance to the Social type (talking, playing with others, taking care of other people). I see less resemblance to the Artistic and Enterprising types, although liking travel, fashion, and adventure suggest their presence. These may be latent traits that will develop more strongly in the future. I see the least resemblance to the Realistic type; actually I see none but there certainly must be a little there. The lack of Realistic characteristics in her career stories seems strange for someone interested in civil engineering (); and, even medicine has Realistic in its code of ISR.

Having gone through my seven-step interpretive routine in a systematic manner, I then summarize my conclusions and prepare to meet the client by doing two last things-- crafting a success formula and composing a life portrait. I aim to craft a first draft of a success formula that a client and I will edit together until the client finds it quite accurate and a little bit inspiring. Success formulas are an integral part of Haldane's (1975) technique of articulating dependable strengths. I recommend his books and materials highly, yet to help practicum students learn to write success formulas, I have devised the handout that appears in Table 2. In writing a success formula for Elaine, a counselor would select one phrase each from the three columns that represent the RIASEC types that she most resembles. Try it yourself. From Investigative, I selected *solve problems*, from Conventional I selected *be part of a team* and from Social I selected *help others*. The first draft of her success formula then became: *You feel happy and successful when you are a part of a team that helps people solve problems*. It could just as easily been *You feel happy and successful*

when you use logic to provide advice about how to organize things.

I then move from the success formula to a more comprehensive portrait of the client. I try to draw a life portrait that captures a client's essential character yet lacks the finishing touches that the client must add during counseling. I start composing the portrait by using my rational mind, yet quickly enrich that logic by drawing upon my intuition. I get in touch with the feelings and interpersonal responses the client has evoked in me. I free associate about how the complex elements in a client's career stories fit the plot line. I daydream about what chapter the client could next write given where the current chapter ends. I think of other people I know who share the client's role models and hobbies in considering how their lives might instruct her.

In composing a life portrait, I aim for an honest portrayal of a client's life as a work in progress, a life that is simultaneously predetermined and unpredictable. The portrait is not the same as a book of life; rather than facts, it presents thematic truth and highlights emotional realities that glue the facts together. It includes tentative answers to implicit questions such as "Who am I?" "What is my quest?" and "How can I grow and flourish?" I emphasize and repeat the life theme, affirming its significance and validity, and use it to unite the meaning of the separate career stories. This emphasis furthers client individuation by integrating the parts and forces that constitute her or him. I do this by imposing narrative structure to construct a view of the self that unites contradictory views, baffling behaviors, and inconsistent stories. Most of all I illuminate the secret that makes the client's life whole. If nothing else, I want the portrait to articulate the controlling idea and ruling passion in the client's life. By clarifying what is at stake and the choices to be made, the life portrait will enhance the client's ability to decide. After I have sketched a portrayal that includes a client's personality type, career adaptability, and life themes, I am ready to engage the client in a conversation about the what, how, and why of his or her life.

I start by reviewing the client's response to my opening inquiry regarding how counseling might be useful to him or her. Then I present the life portrait. I always present the portrait in a way that highlights its developmental trajectory, especially the movement from symptom to strength-- from tension to intention-- so that clients actually feel their own movement from passive suffering to active mastery. In so doing, I act as a story teller in focusing on dramatic movements, always talking

about where the client is headed and asserting the client's agency in directing this movement. Occasionally, I pause to act more like a poet by bringing important details into sharp focus by highlighting vivid expressions of the self in a narrative moment. This is analogous to pausing the movie of the client's life to study a single frame or photograph. These pauses in the action are used to reconstruct old meanings in a way that creates new meanings and opens new avenues of movement. I always restate the obvious in the life portrait, and in candid language, because what is not acknowledged grows bigger than it needs to be.

As I present a portrait to the client I remain curious, never certain. Several times I ask the client if I understand things accurately by inquiring, "What am I missing?" The portrait must be presented as a tentative sketch, not the truth. It gets its validity from organizing the particulars of a life into an internally consistent and personally meaningful story. So in the end, the truth of my portrait of a client is arbitrated by its utility to that client.

With Elaine, I started our second meeting by asking her if she had any additional thoughts about her responses during the *Career Style Interview* or if there were any things she wished to add or clarify. Although she did not, many clients do because they continue to think about the questions and conversation in the hours following the first session. I then reminded her of what she had said in response to my inquiry about how I could be useful to her. Elaine had said that she did not know why she cannot choose a major and she would like help in making a choice. She also had mentioned that she wanted to discuss whether medicine would be a good field for her. This gives us three points of reference in viewing her life portrait: why she cannot choose (i.e., career adaptability), how good a fit is medicine (i.e., vocational personality type), and how to move toward making a choice (i.e., life themes).

I then portray her life theme as fighting powerful creatures who are trying to steal her mind, or in this particular instance her career. She is rebelling by sitting still and refusing to decide in their favor while she marshals personal resources and social support to make her own choice. I paused to get her reaction and revisions. We explored her feelings about the portrait, because affect helps to create meaning. We also looked at her strengths, especially the personal characteristics of which she was most proud. We then discussed how the problems she currently faced were really the best solutions that she could come up with so far. For example, I helped Elaine to reconstruct her indecision from being a problem to it being

the best solution she has found so far for trying to fight off the creatures who are stealing her career by making her sit still for what they want. In this way, I attempted to help her use language, especially her own favorite metaphors and verbs, as a means of controlling the situation and increasing feelings of agency.

Having thus addressed Elaine's first concern-- understanding why she cannot make a decision regarding her academic major-- we moved to her second question--how well a career in medicine would suit her. To address this question, we considered her vocational personality and interests, especially how she proposed to use the world to become more whole. Following the psychosocial model, I sought to create and confirm interests, not diagnose them, by concentrating on the inner means and outer ways that she could use to solve herself and position herself in society. We discussed the interests she had formed as being solutions to her problems in growing up. She wants to be independent and on the go, use logic to solve problems, and work as a part of a team. I presented the two different success formulas that I drafted for her and asked which one felt more fitting. She revised them so that after a few minutes she felt pleased with the following success formula: *I feel happy and successful when I am part of a team that uses logic to help people by providing advice about how to solve their problems in an organized way.* Medicine does not seem to fit her plot as well as some other fields. Medicine has a code of ISR, and she does not strongly resemble the Social or the Realistic types. Certainly, she could do medicine but it may not fully incorporate her self-concept.

We then conversed about her desire for a career in which she could use logic to solve structured problems and be part of a team (IC), not solve the ambiguous, physical problems that patients routinely present to their physicians. I commented that if she were to become a physician, she would probably be attracted to the specialty of radiology. We also talked about whether the Realistic colleagues and aspects of engineering jobs really appeal to her. We talked about exploring majors in computer science, mathematics, and finance. Next we looked in the *Occupations Finder* (Holland, 1994) to identify occupations that fit her code and found no occupations listed under ICS and only one listed for CIS, polygraph examiner. Most of all, we talked about discovering a way in which she could flourish and places where self-definition and self-determination would be possible.

Having addressed, to her satisfaction, the issue of

how well medicine suited her and which other fields merit exploration, we moved on to her third question, which was how to move forward toward choosing a major. We discussed ways forward from where she now sits, including alternative resolutions and possible selves. Her indecision is not a weakness, it reflects a potential strength that must blossom, in her case probably into a life long decisiveness and talent for solving problems. That life must be full of movement, not sitting. I explained that development arises from activity and overcoming difficulties met in the world.

We then engaged in a meaningful conversation about self-construction activities that might make her feel more whole and move her closer to being the person she wanted to be. We conversed about her desire to assert more control over her life and to choose her own major. In preparation for so doing, we talked about possible growth experiences such as working a summer job away from home, moving into a dormitory, taking a workshop on assertiveness, and meeting with a counselor to discuss family issues. She was encouraged by our conversation and actually felt that looking back over her life had given her the ability to move forward and the resolve to do so. We agreed to talk on the phone in the middle of the next semester and meet again during the summer.

When she visited again, the next summer, Elaine reported that she had taken a continuing education course in assertiveness, worked with a college counselor for five sessions to improve her relationship with her parents and reduce her perfectionism, lived away from home while working a summer job as a ticket-taker at an amusement park, and completed elective courses in computer science and accounting. She was leaning toward declaring a major in computer science but wondered if engineering would be a better fit for her. Thinking that she would prefer to explore this ambivalence in an organized way, I invited her to complete the *Incorporation Worksheet* (see Table 3). As we sat together, Elaine rated on a seven-point scale how well the twelve adjectives described first the occupation of a computer specialist, then engineer, and finally herself. These ratings show her construction of the three elements. Although her perceptions may be inaccurate when compared to objective occupational information and personality inventories, they are the perceptions that guide her behavior. If the ratings had seemed grossly inaccurate, we would have discussed them.

We examined her ratings by first determining a RIASEC code for each element by summing the ratings for the two adjectives that represent each type and then

ordering the types. This resulted in a code of ICS for herself, ICA for computer specialist, and IRC for engineer. In terms of RIASEC types, there was a better fit between her and computers than between her and engineering. We then examined how well each occupation incorporated her self-concept by calculating and summing differences between the rating for the two comparisons. The difference between self-ratings and rating for computers was 18 compared to the difference between self-ratings and ratings for engineering, which was 26. Obviously, computers were perceived by Elaine as better incorporating her self-concept. She enjoyed this exercise and felt good about the conclusion she had drawn— to major in computer science.

I next saw Elaine after she graduated with a major in computer sciences. She told me how much she had enjoyed her courses but detested the sexism exhibited by many of her instructors. To combat their bias, she had organized a club for female majors in computer sciences. She was proud of what they had achieved in combating prejudice. She was even more proud of the occupational position that she had recently secured. In two weeks she would begin a job as a systems analyst in a position that required traveling throughout the United States to regional branches of a national firm where she would solve problems that they have with their information technology. Furthermore, Elaine told me that she and her mother were now “friends” and that her mother was proud of her accomplishments and pleased with her prospects. Elaine looked forward to now becoming a woman on the go, one encouraged by a mother who tells her not to sit still when bullies attack her. She glowed as she told me how she had used the things that we had talked about to help her roommates and friends make career choices.

Counselors’ predictions about how Elaine’s career progressed should not be used to evaluate a counselor’s competence. Whether a counselor’s initial “guesses” about the next chapter in Elaine’s career story were right or wrong should never be at issue. What is important is that Elaine’s counselor should be useful to her, not “right.” The counselor would have been useful if she or he helped Elaine understand her career stories; know her vocational personality and preferred work environments; prompted her to become more in control of and confident about her future; helped her compose a success formula; and enabled her to envision and explore possible selves and future scenarios. Clients with career concerns need counselors who help them author their lives, not fortune tellers who make predictions.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have tried to convey the excitement that attends helping people construct their careers. Counselors are privileged to be able to invite clients into a safe space wherein they can examine their vocational personalities, career adaptability, and life themes and then edit their narratives to be more livable and to open new avenues of movement. The modern dichotomies between personal and career counseling and between self and society have become integrated in postmodern conceptions of a self that is formed, maintained, and revised through interpersonal relationships and work roles, and which evolves during a life course of contribution to and cooperation with a community. Occupations offer a way forward for individuals who live in a post-industrial society that abjures stable moral meanings and fragments identities. Career offers individuals a way to construct, test, and implement a stable self by choosing disciplined activities and accepting their obligations. Counseling for career construction encourages individuals to use work and other life roles to become who they are and live the lives they have imagined. In so doing, they will become people that they themselves like and that others cherish.

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Career Style Interview Questions

- A. How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?
1. Who do you admire? Who would you like to pattern your life after?
 - Who did you admire when you were growing up?
 - Why?
 - How are you like _____?
 - How are you different from _____?
 2. Do you read any magazines regularly? Which ones?
 - Why do you like these magazines?
 - Do you have any TV shows you really enjoy?
 3. What do you like to do with your free time?
 - What are your hobbies?
 - What do you enjoy about these hobbies?
 4. Do you have a favorite saying or motto?
 - Tell me a saying you remember hearing.
 5. What are your three favorite subjects in junior high and high school? What subjects do you hate?
 - Why did you love _____, _____, and _____?
 - Why did you hate _____, _____, and _____?
 6. What are your earliest recollections? I am interested in hearing three stories about things you recall happening to you when you were three to six years old.

Table 1

Career Adaptability Dimensions

<u>Career Question</u>	<u>Career Problem</u>	<u>Adaptability Dimension</u>	<u>Attitudes & Beliefs</u>	<u>Competence</u>	<u>Coping Behaviors</u>	<u>Relationship Perspective</u>	<u>Career Intervention</u>
Do I have a future?	Indifference	Concern	Planful	Planning	Aware Involved Preparatory	Dependent	Orientation exercises
Who owns my future?	Indecision	Control	Decisive	Decision making	Assertive Disciplined Willful	Independent	Decisional training
What do I want to do with my future?	Unrealism	Curiosity	Inquisitive	Exploring	Experimenting Risk-taking Inquiring	Interdependent	Information-seeking activities
Can I do it?	Inhibition	Confidence	Efficacious	Problem solving	Persistent Striving Industrious	Equal	Self-esteem building

Table 2

Success Formula Components

R	I	A
WORK WITH TOOLS THINK WITH MY HANDS MAKE OR REPAIR THINGS USE MECHANICAL ABILITY APPLY PHYSICAL SKILL WORK OUTDOORS WORK WITH ANIMALS WORK WITH NATURE DEMONSTRATE SKILL	SOLVE PROBLEMS WORK WITH SCIENCE WORK WITH MATH USE LOGIC RESEARCH IDEAS FIGURE OUT HOW THINGS WORK READ ANALYZE SITUATIONS DISCOVER	BE INDEPENDENT SHARE FEELINGS BE SENSITIVE PAINT PLAY AN INSTRUMENT WRITE APPLY ARTISTIC FLAIR DECORATE DESIGN
S	E	C
HELP OTHERS WORK WITH PEOPLE PROVIDE A SERVICE BE OUTGOING AND PLEASANT HELP CHILDREN ASSIST THE ELDERLY TEACH COUNSEL ADVISE	MAKE DECISIONS CONVINCE OTHERS LEAD A GROUP USE POWER ACT WITH ENTHUSIASM SELL THINGS BE THE CENTER OF ATTENTION BE DYNAMIC HAVE A LOT OF VARIETY	BE PRECISE BE A PART OF A TEAM RECORD DATA TYPE ORGANIZE MATERIALS HAVE A SET ROUTINE KNOW WHAT IS EXPECTED CARRY OUT ORDERS WORK WITH A PARTNER

Table 3
Elaine's Incorporation Worksheet

	<u>Computers</u>	<u>Engineering</u>	<u>Me</u>	<u>1 Minus 3</u>	<u>2 Minus 3</u>
Active	<u>4</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>6</u>
Curious	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Imaginative	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>
Friendly	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
Persuasive	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
Orderly	<u>7</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
Practical	<u>5</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>
Analytical	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Independent	<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>
Helpful	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>
Ambitious	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>
Careful	<u>7</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>
				18	26
	Self-Incorporation w/ Computers				Self-Incorporation w/ Engineering