

Career Counseling Using the Narrative Paradigm

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Recent developments in the basic science of psychology provide a new perspective that advances models and methods for career counseling. This perspective positions narratives at the core of thinking, memory, and language. Basic scientists' recent focus on narratives has prompted career counselors to view "career as story." Viewing career as a story encourages counselors to concentrate career counseling on client narratives and to privilege the subjective perspective of the client.

Two Perspectives on Career Counseling

Counselors view autobiography differently depending upon whether they look from the perspective of the trait metaphor or listen from the perspective of the story metaphor. In looking for traits and what the client "is", counselors assume that the life produces the autobiography. In listening to stories and what the client "does", counselors assume that the autobiographical project itself produces the life.

When looking for traits, career counselors follow the positivist philosophy that privileges the objective perspective. In their efforts to identify traits, counselors use interest inventories, ability tests, and occupational information. Using these tools, counselors seek to foster rational decision making based on objective self-evaluation and realistic exploratory behavior.

When listening to stories, career counselors follow the post-modern

paradigm that privileges the subjective perspective of the participant. In their efforts to understand a life project, counselors use narratives and meaning making. Using these tools, counselors seek to enhance clients' ability to decide by articulating and clarifying clients' stories. A life-enhancing and generative narrative of their lives helps clients to see clearly what is at stake, the alternative choices, and the decision to be made.

Career Counseling as Enhancing Narratability

A client's story is clarified when the counselor focuses attention on how the career problem fits within the pattern of larger meanings being lived by the client. There are no isolated choices; all choices are embedded within an ongoing pattern of living that consists in large and critical part to social interaction. So the counselor constructs a continuous narrative about the client's pattern of living and the constellation of choices which they now face. Counselors then use this narrative to resolve doubt and reduce confusion by framing the indecision problem within the client's ongoing life story. Connecting today's indecision to yesterday's experiences and tomorrow's possibilities makes meaning, allows comprehension, and creates new possibilities. In short, clarifying the narratability of their lives prepares clients to make career decisions. I attempt to construct conflict-free and liveable narratives with clients by connecting story fragments from the past, present, and future into an integrated story that clarifies three things:

- (1) the pattern of unfolding life revealed in the client's history;
- (2) the client's present identity; and
- (3) the client's images of and dreams for the future.

Pattern the Unfolding Life

The first goal in career counseling with narratives is to identify the pattern of the unfolding life. In listening to a set of client stories, counselors attend primarily to the theme. Great stories deal with the dialectic interaction between the linear incidents that make the plot (i.e., plan of action) and the timeless, motionless, underlying themes that make the life. To identify themes, counselors listen to how clients try to become more whole, to complete their stories by growing toward a subjectively defined final goal.

One way to recognize themes is to listen for personal preoccupations, that is, the problems around which clients organize their lives. Another way is to listen for clients' needs and values because these goals indicate how clients seek to resolve or live with their central problems. The pattern revealed when connecting core problems to final goals is the best way to recognize the enduring sense of meaning and unifying orientation that constitute a client's central life theme. The theme orients the client to life much like longitude and latitude orient explorers to place. Like a motif in music, this theme concisely clarifies important experience. The emerging drama is clarified when the counselor can succinctly state a client's life theme as a living solution to an existential problem and then encouragingly describe the theme as a project worthy of a life's devotion.

Give Form to Identity

The second goal in career counseling with narratives is to give form to the client's identity. We define our identity through the stories we tell

because stories invest situations with meaning. Identity can be construed as an individual's ability to articulate a coherent and credible life story by using narratives that portray formative and definitive experiences. Career choice problems that adolescents and young adults experience may occur, in part, because they have not gotten their stories down. They may not yet know or be able to give voice to their own stories because they have not thought them through. What counselors call the identity formation process, that is the process of self-definition, may be understood as a developmental process in which one goes from not knowing one's stories to first knowing and then telling one's story.

We develop our identities by telling stories because this clarifies who we are. Narrating one's stories 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. The stories reveal purposeful activity and causal attributions. Moreover, 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. The self-reflective use of storytelling fosters identity development through insight and organization of experience.

We change our identities by changing our stories. Storytelling can lead to reinterpretation of identity because storytelling reorganizes meaning. Thus, storytelling can transform identity as well as define it and develop it. Simply stated, when we change our stories, we change ourselves.

Imagine the Future

The third goal in career counseling with narratives is to prompt clients to speak openly about their ambitions and dreams for the future. Imaginative stories that deal with a day in the future, future autobiographies, occupational daydreams, and hypothetical obituaries all reveal how clients foresee the unwritten chapters in their life stories. After discussing clients' life themes and articulating their identities, I turn to extending their stories into the occupational future.

In constructing imaginative plot lines, I explain that interests address the heart of the impasse that constitutes indecision because interests express solutions to problems in growing up. I use clients' interests to guide story construction about how they can perfect incomplete gestalten, address unfinished situations, settle scores, or make up for things that were missing in childhood. In effect, I address the question "How can you use what you have already rehearsed?"

Career Counseling For Indecision

A case example may describe how I foster career development by helping clients to articulate a guiding narrative that makes explicit the pattern of their unfolding lives, pictures clear and stable identities, and gives voice to their identity and ambitions for the future. I will discuss the case of a female college sophomore who sought counseling for her career indecision. Before describing how the narrative paradigm was useful to her, I will briefly explain:

- (1) how I view career indecision from the perspective of the career as story metaphor;
- (2) the rationale for the type of story fragments that I seek from undecided clients; and
- (3) how I use these stories to help clients reduce confusion and resolve doubt.

Career Indecision as Hesitation

Career indecision usually arises when people are about to lose their place. In the process of losing our place and making a new place, we transform ourselves. The indecision itself expresses hesitation before transformation. It is a back-and-forth and side-to-side movement not a stall or stop in movement. Wavering, to use Cochran's (1991) term, is movement toward meaning not toward goal. Wavering hesitation brings into the present, from the past and the future, more fundamental motives to guide a life story that is at a point of transformation. During this hesitation, clients review life and focus awareness in an effort to grasp the theme, that is, to construct the whole that will clarify the parts and increase the narratability of the fragments. They will eventually return to forward movement and use the newly refined and narrated life story as a map or blueprint to guide themselves in making a new place for themselves.

Types of Stories Useful for Resolving Indecision

In deciding which types of stories to elicit from undecided clients, I rely on advice from literary criticism as to what makes a good story. Stories achieve their meaning from explaining deviations from the norm (individual

differences). Stories make sense of the difference by portraying intentions that mitigate or comprehend deviations from the cultural pattern. Stories account for how change takes place from beginning to end. So I start at the beginning of clients' lives by asking for stories about the families that raised them. In listening to these stories, I am especially alert for the trouble, imbalance, or deviation that these stories accentuate. In effect, I am listening for the life theme or the problem around which the client organizes her or his life.

Next I seek stories about identity. I do this by asking clients for stories about their heroines and heroes because these role models delineate cultural scripts for problem solving that clients have intentionally adopted. The identity narratives give me the middle of the story and explain how clients seek completion through closing the gap between what they have experienced and what they wanted. These identity stories explain how clients attempt to move from a felt minus to a subjectively-defined plus. More specifically, the identity stories tell me how clients digest their experiences, remember events leading to crystallization of self, and rehearse ways of coping with life.

Narrative Counseling to Resolve Indecision

Having recognized both the life theme and the actor's identity, it is then time to narrate the story to the client and collaborate on editing it. When the story has been brought up to date, we are ready to collaborate on extending it into the future. This requires that we address directly the current indecision which they are using to hesitate before stepping into the

future. The following prompting questions help clients to resolve their indecision and prepare to speak clearly and directly about what they want next in life.

- *Under what circumstance was your indecision recognized, diagnosed, or labeled?
- *How does it feel to be undecided?
- *Of what does the feeling remind you?
- *Tell me an incident in which you had this same feeling before.
- *Do you have any idea of what haunts you?
- *Tell me that part of your life story that is most important to your current indecision.

I know that clients each have something that they want to tell me. Now is the time for them to draw on their courage to say what they think about their project as a human being. I offer the encouragement they need to authorize their story; to give voice to their ambition, that which they hesitate to state.

The following encouragers are useful in making meaning or connections as I help clients to author their future. These encouragers serve to increase the narratability of the life, foster self-understanding, clarify choices, and enhance decision-making ability.

- *How do you see it?
- *What does it mean?
- *What is your opinion about it?
- *Connected to what?
- *How do you put it together?
- *What else was going on at the same time?

Insert Case Example Here

Conclusion

Inscribing "career as story" permits us to conceptualize career counseling as a process of enhancing the narratability of a client's life. During counseling, particular attention needs to be given to stories that reveal the pattern of the life in progress, invest the contemporary identity with meaning, and portray interests as future solutions to old problems. Narratives that situate career indecision in the context of a life pattern (theme) and project (identity) serve to clarify choices and resolve doubt. When clients envision the future as a continuation of their stories, they can overcome their hesitation and step into the next chapter.

Reference

Cochran, Larry (1991). Life-shaping decisions. New York: Peter Lang.