

The Role of Audience in Career Construction

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Commenting on his unique approach within the narrative perspective Michael White once spoke of his therapeutic notion of audience (Bubbenzer, West, & Boughner, 1994). It was apparent that White recognized the potential positive influence of supportive individuals in the lives of his clients as his clients authored or perhaps reauthored their personal narratives. White noted:

So, regardless as to whether I am meeting with an individual, a couple, or a family, I am thinking about possible audiences to the unfolding developments of therapy and thinking about how this audience might be invited to play a part in the authentication of the preferred claims that are emerging in the process of the therapy (pp. 26-27).

### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND NARRATIVE THERAPY

The recent arrival of social construction among helping professionals has led to the emergence of an interest in the utility of narratives in numerous therapeutic contexts. Social constructionists have shown us that narratives serve the role of scripts for the roles played by individuals in their day-to-day lives. Our identity is comprised of the various roles we play out in the presence of those around us. Boughner, Davis, and Mims (1998) explained that “recognition by others as a particular sort of person is a necessary part of identity formation” (p.5).

Some social constructionists maintain that our identity is made up of numerous stories (Gergen & Kaye, 1992; Gergen, 1991). Gergen and Kaye (1992) noted that “to have only a single means of making the self intelligible, then is to limit the range of relationships or situations in which one can function satisfactorily” (p. 178). The multiple stories of our lives or personal narratives center around key issues of our personal worlds such as family, intimate relationships, and career among others.

Some constructionists seek to assist clients in “deconstructing” or “re-authoring” old, unfavorable stories in favor of more satisfying, preferred stories of their lives. The counseling process in this instance assists clients in moving from dominant stories that are “problem-saturated” to alternative stories that have more preferred outcomes (White, 1993; Epston, White, & Murray 1992; White & Epston, 1990; White 1988,1989).

## THE ROLE OF AUDIENCE

The role of the audience has been increasingly recognized as a critical part of the validation of personal narratives (White & Epston, 1990; White, 1992, 1993; Freedman & Combs, 1996). Variations of audience can be found in Madigan and Epston (1995) in the working with “communities of concern” and the concept of “leagues,” White (1995) in the use of the term “nurturing teams,” Gilligan (1993) in the use of “witnesses,” and Anderson (1987) in working with reflecting teams. Freedman and Combs (1996) noted that “if people constitute their preferred selves by performing their preferred stories, then it is important that there be audiences for those stories”(p.237).

Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) noted that the performance of a story requires an audience and, more specifically asserted that “all of us live in a context” (p.110). Monk (1997) elaborated further on our contextual nature:

But stories about ourselves are not just personal inventions. We learn them in our conversation with significant people in our lives. We perform them in our actions, and the reactions of our audiences then become built into our stories about ourselves. In order for the client to make a successful departure from the identity offered by the problem account, an audience needs to be recruited to bear witness to the emergence of the client’s new description of himself (pp. 20-21).

## AUDIENCE AND CAREER

Adler (1956) presented the three major roles in life as work, friends, and love.

Individuals comfortable with Adlerian and narrative practices might readily consider that it is possible for us to have personal narratives related to each of the three major life roles. Therefore, in working with clients it might be helpful to examine the individual narratives, stories, or scripts in regard to the three aforementioned life roles.

Previous efforts have launched a burgeoning school of thinking regarding the importance of the use of narratives or stories in addressing counseling concerns in the major life role of work (Cochran, 1997; Savickas, 1997). Work is one of the various social roles we play that gives meaning to our existence. Savickas (1997) reminded us that we enact our daily lives through



social roles. The definition of *role* according to The American Heritage College Dictionary (1993) is “a character or part played by a performer” (p.1182). Thus social roles imply that we perform our roles in the presence of other people. The meaning we give to our lives is scripted and played out before an audience of others. While it may be an acknowledged reality that we act out our roles in the presence of other individuals, missing from the existing literature related to career narratives is an emphasis on the role of audience. Fortunately, previous contributions related to the use of narratives elsewhere hold considerable possibilities for vocational and career counselors in working with individuals and the narratives scripting their lives. Recognizing, recruiting, and maintaining an audience for the career narratives of our clients involves tapping a highly influential social force outside the client, that could have considerable influence on a client’s success or failure. The utility of the audience in career counseling seems equally important for all stages of development of career narrative from the early, formative stages of narrative development to the later stages of a maturing narrative or even in the process of changes in one’s career narrative that could come out of necessity or as a result of a change of heart about one’s life calling. For example, an audience could validate or anchor a newly developed narrative of the client who is experiencing changes in their career out of free choice, during a mid-life career change, or as career change due to unemployment at mid-career. Whatever the reason, the role of the audience in working with the “stories” of client careers is most certainly worthy of further exploration.

Freedman and Combs (1996) can serve as an effective model for career counselors as their work provides more specifically sample questions to identify and recruit audience members. Essentially, audiences can assist in the creation and validation of the stories of our lives. Audiences can support new stories in favor of previous, less desirable stories. The initiation of the recruitment of an audience can be set into motion by merely asking the client to identify others in their lives who might appreciate and support their narrative. Imagine the twenty-year-old college student who decides to change their major from business to education. *Who might have predicted that the student would have eventually settled on education as a major? Who in*

*their life who would be supportive of this choice?* Instantly, the counselor and the client become aware of individuals who can lend credence to the emerging story of the client in the future role of a teacher.

Audiences can be both real and imaginary. In the case of the student above, the student could easily be encouraged to generate an audience of individuals they interact with, as well as individuals they do not interact with (i.e., a role model, a deceased relative, an absent or former acquaintance, etc.). The most important characteristic of the audience is the meaning the audience has to the client and the potential the audience has in strengthening the individual's story.

### REAL AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

An audience of real individuals or a "known audience" according to Freeman and Lobovits (1993) "consists of those in a person's life who interact with and influence his or her unfolding story" (p.205). Freedman and Combs (1996) offer questions that can be used in the recruitment of others in support of a new, more preferable story. Keeping with the previous example of the college student who has decided to pursue education as their major consider the following questions for recruiting an audience of "real" individuals:

Who would be most interested to learn of this step you've taken? Why would that interest her so? How could you let her know?

Who in your current life would have predicted that you would make this kind of commitment? What do they know about you that would have led them to make this prediction? How would knowing about this step support this knowledge about you? Would that be helpful to you? How? How could you let them know?

Who would most appreciate this event we've been talking about? What might he learn about you if you let him in on it that would be of interest to him? What might he say to you about this? How could you initiate such a conversation? (p. 238)

The questions bring significance to the client's narrative by identifying a supportive audience for the new and perhaps unfamiliar role.



### IMAGINARY AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

Freedman and Combs (1996) noted that the audience being recruited does not necessarily need to be comprised of individuals who are readily available to the client. With the original example of the college student who has decided upon an education major consider the following questions for recruiting an “imaginary” audience:

Who from your past would have predicted this development? What did she know about you that would have led to that prediction? Was there a particular incident that let her in on this about you? How was that incident like this development?

Who would you like to talk to with about this that you have not yet talked with? It could be anyone, living or dead, here or far away. What might they say? (p.239)

Imaginary audience questions can draw from individuals that the counselor may never meet or who may never interact with the client. The imaginary audience can still exert a strong influence upon the client based on the meaning the client attaches to the imaginary audience. In the case of the student in our previous example, using an imaginary audience the client could recruit a former teacher they admired as a child who is now deceased or who is merely no longer in contact with the client.

### INTRODUCED AUDIENCE

A final variation of audience is found in Lobovits, Maisel, and Freeman (1995) described as an “introduced audience.” An introduced audience is “drawn from a wider community of those who have struggled with a problem, who understand its social context, and who are dealing with the problem successfully” (p.225). The introduced audience is similar to an example highlighted by Parry and Doan (1994) as an approach utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous noting that an audience in this instance was in actuality an organization “centered around providing audiences that listen to, and validate, the stories of its members” (p. 158). Madigan and Epston (1995) describe a similar audience termed “leagues” and noted that “leagues are a gathering of persons who have a desire to protest the effects of a particular problem on people’s lives” (pp. 261-262). The recruitment of this type of audience for career narratives implies an even broader context outside the individual including career exploration groups, professional organizations, or

job retraining groups, among other possibilities. Such an audience can serve to further the “new story” of the client providing yet another understanding, supportive group for the client in the process of assuming their newly scripted role.

### CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY

The arrival of career construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2005) provides an excellent context for anchoring the concept of audience into the practice of career counseling. In addition to bringing Super’s theory into the postmodern, post-millennium era Savickas employed social construction as a metatheory to transform the traditional work of Super into a means of generating possibilities with regard to our vocational selves. Anchoring the use of audience in career construction can be perhaps best achieved through incorporating the concept of audience into the process Savickas uses to engage the counseling for career construction process. The Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989) provides the framework for soliciting client stories of self-definition as well as a means of assessing how well the client is able to pull together the themes running through their narrative accounts of their lives. The Career Style Interview also provides valuable insight into the client’s personality and the development of key aspects of an individual’s vocation self such as career adaptability. Savickas (2005) in the case study of Elaine demonstrates the versatility of career construction theory that can be equally matched by the utility of audience. As Elaine’s “life portrait” is constructed her dilemma of not being able to choose a major could hint at concerns with career adaptability, vocational personality in terms of finding a “good fit,” and in capturing the significance of life theme in moving toward the choice of a particular major. In the final stages of his work with Elaine, career construction theory presents an excellent opportunity to introduce the concept of audience for Elaine in support of her eventual choice. Of course the possibilities for the use of audience, in career construction counseling facilitated through the Career Style Interview are abundant. It only seems fitting that the concept of audience in career counseling would approach career construction theory in the same spirit as career construction theory approaches the client. To paraphrase, “How can I be useful to you?” The answer to that resounding question and the possibilities therein await us in



the career construction work we will do with our own clients.

### CONCLUSION

Our lives are played out daily in the presence of others. The arrival of social construction has allowed us to examine and in some instances edit the stories comprising our lives. Through the practice of narrative therapy the concept of audience has emerged as means of supporting new, preferred, and more favorable life stories. As Winslade and Smith (1997) reminded us, "A good story needs an audience before it can be appreciated as a good story" (p. 189).

Career counselors can assist clients in defining and scripting more preferred ways of seeing themselves vocationally in their theater of work or what Savickas (1997) describes as "a forum for both individual identity and social significance." Key decisions related to our career including those involving a change of direction in regard to our career, ultimately leads us to re-think and re-write a chapter or chapters of our vocational self and ultimately a significant part of our identity. As we construct our careers it may become increasingly important to recognize the powerful support that can be generated through an audience of others around us or in some cases we may come to realize that a new audience must be generated for a new direction we have chosen. Whether real, imagined, or introduced the concept of audience can provide a means of enhancing the career counseling process.

Career construction theory provides an excellent context for the emergence of the use of audience in career counseling. An ultimate aim of career construction articulated by Savickas hinted at the notion of the ever present "others" of our audience. Savickas (2005) noted that "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 doing so, they will become people that they themselves like and that others cherish" (p.68).



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