

Using Biographical-Hermeneutics in  
Constructivist Career Intervention

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As U.S. society approaches the turn of the millennium, it seems to be moving from a twentieth century objectivist perspective on facts to a twenty-first century constructivist perspective on meaning. Constructivism represents a metatheory and epistemologic stance that emphasizes self-conceiving, self-organizing, and proactive features of human knowing (R. Neimeyer, 1995). The scientific community's growing interest in the social construction of reality, with its multiplicity of perspectives, holds many implications for theories of career development and counseling. In recent years, researchers have produced an embryonic literature that uses constructivism to comprehend careers. Constructivism's focus on self-conceiving, self-organizing processes is reshaping career counseling from an objective enterprise to an interpretive science. The three leading constructivist approaches to career counseling consist of personal construct psychology, biographical hermeneutics, and the narrative paradigm. At this conference, you will have the opportunity to hear David Jepsen discuss the narrative paradigm in his paper entitled "Career Counseling Using Narrative Techniques." My presentation today addresses the use of biographical hermeneutics in constructivist career counseling. The present paper has three parts, the first part explains the biographical-hermeneutical model of career, the second part describes associated methods for career assessment and counseling, and the third part provides specific examples of how practitioners apply these methods. A brief explanation for the rising popularity of constructivist career counseling precedes these three sections.

#### The Emergence of Constructivist Career Counseling

The end of the twentieth century finds society changing its base from industry to information. Huge corporations such as IBM, U.S. Steel, and

General Motors are disappearing. Without the hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations that gave form to careers, career paths themselves seem to be disappearing. U.S. Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich observed that "Twenty years ago, you could fairly easily plot a career. It might have had a few twists and turn, but you would progress through a hierarchy of positions that were more or less predetermined. Career paths are now gone. They're not even trails... The lack of a career path means that people... are more on their own" (Brazaitis, 1996). Daily newspapers are replete with stories of "re-engineering organizations," "downsizing," "learning organizations," "dejobbing," and "contingent workers." Fewer and fewer companies promise life-time employment following a career path. As the information age sweeps away the old hierarchies, its computer technology flattens organizations, breaks middle management rungs off the career ladder, and hires "contingent workers" for term-specific contracts. Job security is history. Today's workers must manage their own careers, with resumes becoming a list of transferable skills and adaptive strengths. Increasingly, individuals working at overspecialized jobs that involve a single task are being replaced by employees who work in teams with each member performing many tasks. Given this transformation in society and its occupations, life-time employment must become life-time employability. Individuals can anticipate losing several jobs during their worklives, and thus should focus on skills that can get the next job.

This change in the structure of work and its social organization means that the modern paradigm of matching people to positions needs to be expanded to address individuals as managers of their own careers, drawing meaning from the role of work in their lives not from an organizational culture. Careers

must become more personal and self-directed to flourish in the postmodern, information age. The need to shift to personal meaning and become an agent in one's own life draws inspiration and support from constructivist metatheory (Savickas, 1995a). The lens of constructivism allows counselors to view career, not as life-time employment on an organizational ladder, but as a carrier of personal meaning that defines and structures significant events in a life (Carlsen, 1988, p. 186). In the postmodern era, career may become a framework for personal meaning, rather than a path through an organization.

Career counselors who make note of these transformations in society and its occupations are using constructivist models and methods to reshape career theory and practice (Savickas, 1995a). Constructivism extends objectivism's focus on predicting who will fit which occupations to include the meaning of work to individuals and how they can use this meaning to manage their careers and complete their lives (Savickas, 1995b & 1995c). Rather than looking just at how people fit into the occupational structure, constructivists envision how work fits into peoples' lives (Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1993, 1994). One approach to explaining how work can advance a client's life story emerges from biographical hermeneutics.

#### Biographical-Hermeneutic Model of Careers

Counselors who construe careers through life histories take the biographical-hermeneutic approach to constructivist career counseling (Ochberg, 1988). Young and Collin (1988, 1992) were among the first to explicitly apply hermeneutical canons for knowledge production to constructing careers. They emphasized the subjective perspective of life histories in writing that "biography is concerned with the phenomenal role of lived experience" (Collin & Young, 1986, p. 847). Counselors gather



autobiographical accounts from their clients, and then use psychological interpretation to construct a coherent, unifying life theme with which to elucidate and pattern the life history. Because the interpretation systematically applies principles of personality psychology, the results may be called a psychobiography. Systematic interpretation is so central to the biographical hermeneutics that the approach takes half of its name from hermeneuein, a Greek word meaning "to interpret."

Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, provides principles and methods for comprehending the central meaning in life histories and thus understanding them as psychobiography. Hermeneutics originated as part of a rebellion against church authorities who used dogma to dictate the meaning of the bible. Independent scholars sought to reconstruct what a biblical passage really meant to its author. To determine this intrinsic meaning, they created systematic principles to guide the extraction of meaning from the text itself, eschewing the use of church doctrine to interpret the bible. These canons rest on the axiom that the meaning of a passage in a text should be understood from the perspective of the author's intentions and the text as a whole. The application of hermeneutic canons produces understanding that is intrinsic to the text, not explanation based on extrinsic dogma. Hermeneutics offers counselors established canons and systematized procedures to increase the meaningfulness and accuracy in a psychobiography. A "hermeneutic circle" provides the main interpretive method. The method operates in a circular, dialectic fashion to interpret an unknown "whole" by referring to what is already known, that is, the parts. Interpretation occurs in a circle of understanding-- parts are seen in the whole and the whole is seen through its constituent parts. Initially, episodes shape the whole, but as interpretation

proceeds, theme formation integrates episodes so that the theme dialectically shapes the episodes. This dialectic synthesis subsumes the parts into fewer and fewer images as it progressively becomes more inclusive. The hermeneutic circle creates an evermore integrated whole that interprets and incorporates the particulars while the particulars construct the whole. "A story's parts and its whole must, as it were, be made to live together" (Bruner, 1996, p. 137). Note that the "whole" or "narrative truth" constructed by the hermeneutic circle differs from scientific fact. Science validates its facts by correspondence to external reality. Hermeneutics validates its plausibility through negotiating consensus and intersubjective agreement as well as by demonstrating coherence, internal consistency, and pragmatic usefulness. The whole is not true factually, yet it is true in the sense in which carpenters use true to mean level, balanced, and capable of sustaining a structure. A coherent and consistent whole, or life theme, "stands under" a life to support present meaning and sustain future planning. Constructivist career counselors use the hermeneutic circle to weave together, as parts and whole, the particular strands of life history accounts and the general life theme. The biographical theme derives its meaning from individual episodes, yet the theme governs interpretation of its constituent episodes. Counselors interpret specific details in a life history as part of the life pattern's global structure. The theme produces a convincing account of the meaning of the client's life history and counselors use it, in a hermeneutic circle, to make past episodes, present experiences, and future ambitions more intelligible and available to inform career decision making and life planning.

Hermeneutic knowing has singular relevance for understanding human

lives. A life, having been lived, creates a text which is available for hermeneutic interpretation (Ricoeur, 1971). Hermeneutic methods are particularly appropriate for interpreting the career texts that clients bring to counseling because, according to Taylor (1971), hermeneutics is most apt when a text is "confused, incomplete, cloudy." The biographical-hermeneutic approach to constructivist career counseling seeks to compile a career text or life history and then to understand the connecting theme that produces a coherent, unified psychobiography. Thus, the biographical-hermeneutic approach to careers elicits client life histories, applies hermeneutic interpretation methods to understand the life theme, and then extends the resulting psychobiography into the future as a basis for career decision making and life planning.

#### Life History Psychology

The theoretical model for biographical-hermeneutical career counseling draws on two traditions in personality psychology-- the ego psychologies of Adler (1956) and Erikson (1968) and the personological psychologies of Allport (1961) and Murray (1938). These two life history traditions share a common belief that all people have psychological problems and overcoming these problems is the most important issue in a life (Hogan, 1983). Both ego-psychology and personological psychology center their attention beneath the surface of manifest behavior and objective traits to focus on latent motives, either psychogenic needs or life themes.

Adaptation. Life history theories agree that life themes deal with adaptation and therefore they each concentrate attention on adapting and moving toward the goal of overcoming adversity. Adaptation can be broadly defined as "improvements in the organism's pattern of interaction with its

environment which increase its chance for survival, cultural self-realization, and perpetuation of the type" (Rado, 1969, pp. 7-8). Constructs are adaptive tools that "provide us with an instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world" (Vaihinger, 1924, p. 15). Thus, the construct pattern or life theme reveals how and in which direction an individual moves to become more whole.

Mastery. Adaptation always moves toward the general goal of increased mastery or self-expansion (Angyal, 1965), from patient to agent. Human beings do all they can to grow toward a subjectively defined final goal. Adler (1956) described this line of movement as going from a felt negative to a perceived plus. Freud (1948), in stating the seminal paradigm for ego psychology, believed that each individual must turn "it into I" by actively mastering what they passively suffer. The most elegant statement of this mastery paradigm appears in Milton's (1940/1667, p. 33) Paradise Lost. Upon arriving in hell, Lucifer turns to his followers and says, "Our torments also may, in length of time become our elements." Lucifer explains to his followers, like a counselor advises clients, that adaptation involves appropriating our own pain to come terms with existence (Ochberg, 1988).

Continuity, character, and identity. The goal of perfecting oneself or becoming more complete, by actively mastering what has been passively suffered, is not an immediate goal, like finishing a book. Instead, it is a life goal toward which the individual continually yearns and strives yet can never fully reach. This continuous striving toward greater wholeness structures a coherent and continuous self as individuals follow their line of movement across the life course. The line of movement or life theme composes behavioral episodes into a meaningful whole. A life theme gives the

individual meaning and distinction, like the *idée fixe* or leitmotif in a piece of music by Berlioz or Wagner. The life theme makes the person self-consistent, and thus intelligible to the self and identifiable by other people. Lacking self-consistency, an individual would be only a collection of behaviors lacking direction. Similar to a musical melody transposed to another key, a person changes yet, in some important sense, remains the same. If this were not true, then we would not have a person. So, while behaviors and strategies for living change and are transposed as the individual adapts and develops, the life theme remains constant. The enhancement and enlargement of the adaptive repertoire does not change the goal and life plan, it only improves the methods for moving forward.

The methods for moving forward provide the substance of character and psychosocial identity. Character means one's general way of being, with its definite pattern and organized style of adapting. Repetition of choices, based on one's constructs, reflexively engraves a relatively stable character. Character is "consistent reflective choosing, not something behind it" (Kamler, 1994, p. 153). Identity involves recognition, by self and others, of one's characteristic choices. "Ego identity, then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, the style of one's individuality, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for significant others in the immediate community." (Erikson, 1968, p. 50)

Life themes. Each distinct school of thought in life history psychology uses a distinctive concept with which to guide the hermeneutic search for a life-defining theme in autobiographical accounts. These unifying concepts supply a lens with which to recognize the unique pattern in life episodes.

Each one takes a slightly different vantage point from which to observe the whole. Nevertheless, each one looks for the same whole, one subjectively constructed by the unique individual. It is important to remember to use these lenses to recognize the meaning of experience to the subjects, from their own point of view. The unifying concepts should never be used as preconceived patterns to impose on a life history.

The unifying concepts are as varied in name, yet as similar in content, as Adler's (1956) life style, Allport's (1961) proprium, Berne's (1972) script, Erikson's (1968) ego-identity, Kelly's (1955) core role, Lecky's (1945) self-consistency, McAdam's (1993) personal myth, Murray's (1938) unity theme, Reich's (1933) character, and Sartre's (1943) project. These unifying concepts are each variants of the fundamental concept-- life theme. Each concept is useful in making meaning of a life, if not reliable in producing scientific explanation, to the degree that it can be used in the hermeneutic circle to compose a unique life theme.

Life themes involve blueprints for living, they structure how events are remembered and new experiences encountered (Ochberg, 1988). They are ideological simplifications that organize experience into a convincing construction that satisfies the adaptive needs of the individual.

Csikszentmihaly and Beattie (1979) offer the best introduction to the use of life-theme concepts in career counseling. Based on an examination of life theme concepts in different personality theories, they produced an integrative definition of life theme--"a problem or set of problems which a person wishes to resolve above everything else and the means the person finds to achieve solution" (p. 50). They conclude, based on clinical studies of thirty biographies, that life themes develop in four steps: (1) recognize an

existential stress, (2) label the main problem, (3) state the cause of the problem in form that allows a solution, and (4) adopt a method of solving the problem. Note that, in many ways, this sequence of life-theme development provides a viable outline for stages in career counseling.

#### Biographical-Hermeneutic Methods for Career Counseling

The biographical-hermeneutic approach to constructivist career counseling seeks to help individuals articulate how they conceive of their project as a human being. It starts with an assessment that elicits a life history and interprets life themes. It then moves to counseling that helps clients to understand their themes and extend them into the future to clarify choices and enhance decision making.

#### Assessment

When conducting a career pattern assessment, counselors act more like biographers than actuaries. They focus on life stories rather than test scores, and on enabling action rather than matching people to positions. In taking a subjective and longitudinal perspective on lives, counselors ask clients to produce autobiographical accounts and documents that describe formative and defining events in their lives. Counselors also may elicit subjective meaning from clients by using projective techniques (Watkins & Savickas, 1990). Counselors use the hermeneutic circle to interpret the resulting text and to understand the recurring themes and underlying trends that unify the life history into a psychobiography.

In applying hermeneutic canons to autobiographical accounts, Kockelmans (1975) outlined five principles that, in the career realm, direct counselors to (a) collect ample life history material from clients, (b) respect clients' uniqueness in not requiring their psychobiographies to fit preconceived life

themes, (c) try to understand clients' life themes at their deepest level, (d) use the hermeneutic circle to produce a psychobiography adequate for the needs of career decision making, and (e) explicate each life theme's present meaning and future extrapolation.

Problems and solutions. In constructing a life theme using the hermeneutic circle, counselors strive to recognize a client's life line by first defining two points-- the problem and perceived solution. The ego psychology and personological approaches both apply the hermeneutic circle to identify unique life themes, from clients' points of view, by uncovering existential problems and life goals. Nevertheless, they each use different tactics to identify these two defining points in a life line.

Counselors who take the personological perspective on life histories (Allport, 1961; Murray, 1938) elicit biographical material from personal documents, interviews, and autobiographies (Annis, 1967) as well as from projective techniques such as the Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1938). They then study these materials to assess client needs and values. Needs, or what the person requires to feel secure, reveal the problem. The pattern of needs defines which goals have value or meaning to the individual (Angyal, 1941) in resolving the problem. Values denote the objects or gratifications in the world that people seek to satisfy their needs. Values are general goals which confirm who we are and what we wish to become. They signal a commitment to a way of life. In addition, values are communal and consequential because, as community sanctioned ways to meet needs, they relate the individual to the community (Bruner, 1990).

Career counselors who take the ego-psychology approach elicit autobiographical accounts using structured career interviews, such as those



adapted from Transactional Analysis to uncover scripts (Kurtz, 1974) and from Individual Psychology to uncover life-styles (McKelvie & Friedland, 1978). From client autobiographical accounts, they identify the central problems and goals. For example, Savickas (1995b) described a procedure for uncovering clients' problems and goals. He identifies the problem from clients' early recollections (McKelvie, 1979) about their childhoods. These prototypical memories reveal the tacit pre-occupations and plots that organize a client's life. Clients reveal their goals, or envisioned solutions to their problems, in describing role models. These models propose cultural scripts that individuals can follow to solve different problems. Savickas believes that the early recollections show the tension whereas role models show the intention. Connecting tension to intention, or problem to goal, suggests a line of interests.

Interests. The next step in biographical-hermeneutical assessment for both the ego-psychology and personological approaches involves interpreting the life theme by connecting the problems and goals with interests. Interests bridge from id to ego, from it to I, from felt negative to perceived plus, and from needs to values. In Latin, inter est means "to be between," that is, between an individual and her or his subjective construction of environmental opportunities to become more whole. Interests, as solutions to problems in growing up (Carter, 1940), portray how individuals subjectively plan to transcend previous limitations and become more complete. They guide the line of movement along the career path. Interests express anticipation and intentionality as they stretch out to impose direction on future vocational behavior (Miller-Tiedeman, & Tiedeman, 1985).

Psychobiography and character. The interaction among needs-values-

interests or problems-goals-solutions constitutes the life theme and plots the client's line of movement. In identifying the life theme, a counselor has formed the whole from its constituent parts. Next, continuing to use the hermeneutic circle, the counselor must understand the parts (autobiographical accounts) in the sense of the whole (theme). Like actors must study their roles in a play, counselors must study and unify the life history to understand the client's role in life, that is, character. In his celebrated system for teaching acting, Stanislavsky emphasized that each character in a play has an overall objective that conditions all of her or his behavior throughout the play. This superobjective welds together all aspects of the role and the actor must know the superobjective in order to enact an integrated and purposeful character in each scene (Levin & Levin, 1992). Similarly, the counselor must use the client's life theme, with its superobjective, to comprehend and bind together life history episodes into a coherent and consistent psychobiography. The psychobiography describes both the client's life theme and its particular life history episodes framed in terms of that theme. Near the end of the psychobiography, many counselors include a mapping sentence that succinctly summarizes the meaning of an interesting occupation.

Mapping sentences. The career implications of a psychobiography can be succinctly stated in a mapping sentence that connects the objective occupation to the subjective career. Cochran (in press), Kurtz (1974), and Savickas (1989) each urge counselors to use objective and subjective methods in tandem. Focusing on either the public occupation or personal career alone produces a unidimensional view of a client. Used in tandem, the dual perspectives on the individual's work role produces a more complex, realistic, and meaningful life

portrait of a client.

Osherson (1980) provided a format for an "objective + subjective" mapping sentence that follows from his distinction between the public and personal meanings of an occupational choice. The objective, public meaning of an occupational role involves attributes that make that job attractive. Subjective, personal meaning underlies public meaning. Osherson (1980, p. 25) provided an elegant format for a mapping sentence. With slight modifications, it reads: I will become an occupational choice to role attributes (the public meaning), so that personal meaning. For example, the mapping sentence in one medical student's psychobiography read, "I will become a physician to fight disease, so that I can conquer my own fear of death and finally earn my mother's respect." The public meaning in this sentence indicates her intended social contribution and the personal meaning expresses her life themes. This integrative choice lets her actively master the passive suffering she experienced when she observed her father die slowly from cancer.

### Counseling

The transition from assessment to counseling begins when a counselor narrates a client's psychobiography, with its life theme, character sketch, and mapping sentence. The counselor uses the psychobiography to increase clients' self-knowledge and to help them comprehend the thematic lines of development along which they guide their lives (McAdams, 1985). The counselor explains the theme to the client as "living out of a solution to an existential problem as a central project of life" (Cochran, 1991, p. 23). The theme is organized around certain problems, and the central life project involves working toward solutions to these core problems. The counselor treats the theme as a motif, or concise classification of important

experiences. Used in this way, the theme clarifies the emerging drama and predicts the future.

After the initial reading of the psychobiography, the client and counselor collaborate to revise and further clarify the motivational themes that shape the client's character. Collaborative editing of the psychobiography prompts clients to think about their lives in terms of larger meanings. It encourages them to make additional connections, thus constructing a clearer, deeper, and more enduring meaning for their lives. The emerging drama is sufficiently clarified when clients can understand and explain their life themes as solutions to their problems in growing up and as projects worthy of a life's devotion. This collaborative revision continues until it's subject, the client, authorizes the psychobiography as a useful tool for comprehending his or her life. Then, the counselor assists the client to extend the psychobiography into the future as a basis for career decision making and life planning.

Thematic-extrapolation. Extending the psychobiography and its theme into the future provides a basis for making educational/vocational choices and life plans. Super (1954) called this primary method for biographical-hermeneutic counseling "extrapolation based on thematic analysis." He viewed it as the "developmental method" for matching people to positions, and proposed it as an alternative to trait-and-factor methods (Super, 1961). "In the life pattern approach an attempt is made to project trends into the future, to extrapolate, modifying each 'thema' in the light of others in order to predict future development and behavior" (Super, 1954, pp. 13-14). The psychobiography and its thematic extension into the future should help clients impose direction on their vocational behavior by clarifying their career goals

and the means to reach these goals. In discussing how their themes might stretch out into the future, counselors strive to foster in clients a sense of unity and purpose, that is, a feeling of wholeness and a confidence that their lives are moving in a self-charted direction. The theme's future extension should help to clarify alternative choices and thus make it easier for clients to make career decisions.

This career clarification helps clients to consider how personal projects can be validated and advanced through social occupations. The counselor assists this process by encouraging clients to view occupational roles as enabling personal solutions that, through contribution and cooperation, embed them in a community. Connecting personal themes to social occupations, in due course, leads clients to make career decisions that offer the potential to turn their personal minus into a social plus, to make them more whole by continuing to actively master what they have passively suffered.

The fruitfulness of a decision and the usefulness of a choice increases when clients self-consciously integrate their personal projects with social contributions. Focusing either on private victories or social contributions leads to selfish or selfless choices, neither of which can provide a "true" (i.e., level, balanced, stable) solution to problems in living. Individuals must integrate personal projects with community contributions in a way that balances getting and giving, that is, makes a living by what they get and makes a life by what they give.

#### Applications: Kurtz's Scripts and Savickas' Styles

The most effective biographical-hermeneutical counseling methods incorporate the objective perspective on occupations with the subjective perspective on career. For example, Kurtz's (1974) application of script

analysis to career counseling aptly combines the two perspectives. After briefly explaining the basic tenets of Transactional Analysis, the counselor helps clients to engage in three Parent Ego-State exercises that uncover parental influences on their values and careers. Next, two Child Ego-State exercises help clients to understand their fantasies and needs as these pertain to career decision making. Following this exploration of the subjective perspective, attention turns to the objective perspective. The Adult Ego-State exercise reflects the objective perspective in using aptitude test scores to rationally consider important facts about the client's talents and a Strong Interest Inventory profile (Harmon, Hansen, Borgen, & Hammer, 1994) to evaluate the client's similarity to people already employed in preferred occupations. In the final exercise, clients use script analysis to interpret their life themes and understand their lives as unfolding dramas. Counseling culminates as counselors assist clients to integrate the outcomes from all six exercises, including subjective understandings and objective facts, in formulating a list of specific occupations to explore in-depth.

Savickas' (1989) application of Individual Psychology's life style counseling (Adler, 1956) blends biographical-hermeneutical methods with Holland's (1985) actuarial methods. Intervention starts with a structured interview that elicits autobiographical accounts using a sequence of eight stimulus questions about role models, favorite books, magazines, leisure activities, school subjects, mottos, ambitions, and decisions. Clinical assessment of client responses to the eight topics of inquiry identifies the subjective career theme as well as produces an objective occupational theme in the form of a RIASEC code (Holland, 1985). Combining the public meaning, social contribution, and personal meaning composes a psychobiography that

includes a character sketch, life theme, superobjective, and mapping sentence. The counselor uses the resulting psychobiography to elucidate the client's career path, vocational interests, and occupational prospects.

The counselor frequently refers to the psychobiography and the idea that occupations foster active mastery and promote self-completion as counseling progresses, and occasionally recycles, through seven structured phases: (1) discussing the psychobiography with the client, (2) examining the life theme as it affects career decisions making, (3) considering how clients' interests scripts the next chapter in their psychobiographies by pointing to certain occupations as useful in actively mastering what has been passively suffered, (4) preparing a list of occupations and strategies for their in-depth exploration, (5) reviewing exploration outcomes in terms of the psychobiography, (6) making tentative educational/vocational choices, and (7) planning to garner social support for a choice and to cope with choice barriers.

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