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Story telling: crafting identities

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Career guidance clients are seeking to craft new identities that better position them in their careers. The focus of the present article is on narrative career counselling's potential contribution in providing a meaningful and useful experience for career guidance clients. To illustrate the potential of narrative career counselling, the story telling approach is offered as an example to illustrate how identity can be crafted in contextually and culturally sensitive ways.

Keywords: story telling; career guidance; identity; narrative career counselling

'Who are YOU?' said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then'.

Alice's experience in this scene from Lewis Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is not unlike that of most individuals as they try to navigate their career development in a complex world of work context. Individuals turn to career guidance practitioners as they seek answers to questions about who they are and who they could become. They are uncertain of their present identities and curious about their future identities. Alice's search for identity reflects the search facing many individuals in a world of change:

'Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual . . . Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? . . . But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!' (Carroll, 1865)

The *great puzzle* facing career counsellors of how to seek new ways of responding to the complex needs of diverse clients is considered in this article. Narrative career counselling has been widely viewed as a key to that puzzle and it offers the possibility of a new identity for the field and a sustainable and achievable future story (Savickas et al., 2009). The move towards narrative career counselling has evolved into several approaches, including the story telling[1] approach (McMahon, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2012). The focus of the present article is on narrative career counselling's potential contribution in providing a meaningful and useful experience for career counselling clients. To illustrate the potential of narrative career

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counselling, the story telling approach is offered as an example of how identity can be crafted in contextually and culturally sensitive ways. A brief history of career guidance approaches provides a background to the emergence of narrative career counselling in general and the story telling approach in particular. Subsequently, the article discusses identity and the story telling approach and presents an example of the story telling approach's capacity to contextualise the crafting of identity within cultural settings specific to individual clients.

A brief history of career guidance approaches

Career guidance has a long history during which its methods of delivery have changed several times. Savickas (2008) broadly described this change process according to the economic eras in which career guidance occurred. Specifically, Savickas suggested that in the 50-year history of career guidance prior to 1900, the dominant helping approach was mentoring in the agricultural communities of that time. As the industrial era took hold, vocational guidance emerged both as a discipline and as the dominant helping approach for the next 50 years. Subsequently, as society became more corporate and client groups and client needs changed, career counselling became more prominent as a helping approach during the second half of the twentieth century. Along with this came a shift in terminology from the widespread use of 'vocation' to 'career', the definition of which is now viewed as a holistic construct incorporating work in life.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, with the pace of societal change becoming more rapid, it was suggested that the next reconstruction of the field calls for it to be less expert and assessment driven, more culturally and contextually sensitive, and more inclusive of qualitative and subjective processes (McMahon, Watson, Chetty, & Hoelson, 2012b; Savickas, 1993; Watson, 2009). In this regard, there have been calls for career guidance approaches to be developed in locations outside its traditional western, predominantly American paradigms (Stead & Watson, 2006) in order to address criticism in the field that such approaches may not be culturally and contextually appropriate in other settings, especially non-western settings. Savickas (2008) has proposed that self-construction will become the helping approach for the first half of the twenty-first century. More recently, Savickas et al. (2009) have proffered the term 'life designing' as an approach to career guidance that facilitates self-construction and, in doing so, reflects a move towards the more widespread use of narrative career counselling.

In essence, Savickas (2008) has described how the identity of career guidance has changed in response to cultural and contextual changes throughout its history. This shift in helping approaches is a response to the need for a new identity for career counselling and the need to produce 'a "good narrative" for career practice in the 21st century' (Watson & McMahon, 2005, p. ix). Since Cochran's (1997) seminal text on narrative career counselling, there has been a growing trend towards narrative approaches in career guidance and a number of approaches have been proposed (e.g. Amundson, 2003; McMahon, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2012; Peavy, 1998; Pryor & Bright, 2011; Savickas et al., 2009). To date, however, most of these approaches have emanated out of western contexts, including Canada, the United States of America, and Europe. An emerging approach to narrative career counselling – the story telling approach – is being developed in both the western

context of Australia and in non-western contexts within South Africa. Thus this narrative approach stands alone for its origins in a non-western culture.

Similar to other narrative approaches, the story telling approach emphasises connectedness, meaning making and agency as core constructs. Connectedness refers to the contextual location of individuals' careers and how diverse influences impact on careers. Specifically, connectedness recognises that individuals live in familial, social, community, geographic and sociopolitical contexts, all of which have some degree of influence on the opportunities and constraints faced by individuals as they construct their career identities. As individuals tell their stories, locate them in particular contexts and identify various influences, they come to understand their stories in a different way through a process of meaning making. In this process, emerging themes within and between their stories are identified. The identification of such themes reinforces the viewpoint that narrative approaches are 'holistic and contextualising' (Collin, 2006, p. 298). Agency refers to the role that individuals play in the construction of their identities and careers. In addition, the story telling approach includes reflection and learning explicitly as core constructs whereas their role in other career narrative approaches is more implicit. Reflection refers to the intangible subjective, cognitive and personal process that occurs for individuals as they tell their stories to a career counsellor who listens and responds in order to facilitate the identification of themes that permeate the stories that are told. Learning refers to the new insights and new knowledge gained by individuals during the process of career counselling.

Fundamental to narrative approaches is storytelling, which Cochran (2007, p. 18) describes as a 'human universal'. In narrative approaches to career counselling, stories are elicited in different ways including the use of qualitative career assessment instruments. For example, Amundson (2003) terms his narrative career counselling process 'active engagement' and uses strategies such as the Pattern Identification Exercise to elicit themes common to the stories. The life design approach utilises a career style interview (Savickas, 2005) that comprises five questions to elicit stories from clients and subsequently their themes. In the story telling approach, the My System of Career Influences qualitative career assessment instrument may be used to elicit stories (McMahon, Watson, Chetty, & Hoelson, 2012a, 2012b) and is explained in more detail below.

Identity

So why is storytelling so intrinsic to the way people live their lives? A number of authors (e.g. McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004; White, 1989) suggest that storytelling is the way in which individuals make sense of their experiences. Further, the telling of stories can have very real effects on individuals and contribute to the shaping of their lives (White, 1992). Storytelling becomes a mechanism through which identity is crafted (La Pointe, 2010), a point recognised by White (1989) in his term self-narratives. Similarly, McAdams (2001) regards identity as 'an internalized and evolving life story' (p. 117), subsequently using the term 'narrative identity' (McAdams, 2011, p. 99). Thus, narrative approaches to career counselling enlist storytelling processes to assist individuals to construct their future identities.

Identity is a particularly relevant, although not new, construct to career guidance. The construct of identity does permeate major theoretical accounts of career development but it is often subsumed in discussions of self. For example, Blustein

(1994) noted the use of constructs such as self, self-concept and self-efficacy in a range of theories. Indeed, Blustein alerts us to a longstanding issue regarding a lack of clarity about the use of self in career psychology. More recently, Savickas (2011) has clarified how self has been understood in the history of vocational psychology. Savickas classifies the use of self into three categories. The first category views self as object and may be likened to 'psychometric selves' (Lamprecht, 2002, p. 124) where personality can be measured. The second category views self as subject and emphasises a more subjective and personal assessment of self. These two views have traditionally presented career guidance with an either/or dichotomy in theory and practice which has not served the field well. A more beneficial position for the field is to recognise the complementarities between the two categories. Thus, the third category suggested by Savickas views self as project and combines the previous two categories. Within Savickas's (2011) third category of self as project, identity is defined as a process of construction and reconstruction. Thus, identity is reformulated through an ongoing process of self-constructed stories.

Despite this historical clarification of self and identity within career guidance, there is recognition that '[t]heoretical models of the self remain piecemeal and disorganized' (Savickas, 2011, p. 30). In response to Savickas's call for career psychologists to clarify their discussion of self, the story telling approach regards self as a project that is inclusive of identity construction through the telling of stories in psychosocial contexts. La Pointe (2010, p. 2) also emphasises the psychosocial context in stating that career identity is 'co-constructed, socially situated and performed in interaction'. Within the story telling approach, the role of identity is conceptualised as a 'meaning making anchor' (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012, p. 69); essentially, knowing who you are informs your career choices. Thus, engaging in the interactive process of telling stories of past and present experiences results in the crafting of a future story that is 'identity based and identity congruent' (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 69). Crafting identity is a process of the story telling approach.

The story telling approach to narrative career counselling

The story telling approach to narrative career counselling (McMahon, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2012) is grounded in the Systems Theory Framework (STF; McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006) of career development which portrays the complexity of individuals' lives through dynamic, recursively connected individual, social and environmental-societal systems of influence. Importantly, these systems of influences are located within the context of time. Past experiences influence the present lives of individuals and, together, past and present experiences influence the future of the individual. The systems of the STF represent the content of stories and also the sites within which stories have been constructed by individuals over time. The STF is dynamic in nature and this is reflected in its process constructs of recursiveness, change over time and chance, all of which account for changes and interaction within and between the systems of influence over time.

Various authors (e.g. Collin, 2006) over many years have advocated the relevance of systems theory to career development because of its ability to take account of the complex contextual locations of individuals' lives. Systems theory is about wholes and parts; parts are systems and also subsystems of wholes or larger systems. Critical

to systems is 'the interdependence of their parts, relationship between the whole, its parts, and its environment; interaction rather than linear causes-and-effects' (Collin, 2006, pp. 298–299). Thus the application of systems theory to career development and its use as a foundation for career counselling is responsive to calls for more contextually and culturally sensitive frameworks and approaches (e.g. Savickas, 1993; Stead & Watson, 2006; Watson, 2009). In particular, the STF provides a map for the career counselling process (McMahon & Patton, 2006) that facilitates exploration of the 'complex web of relationships . . . the complex interactions that take place, and so highlighting crucial influences and tensions' (Collin, 2006, p. 300) in the lives of clients.

An application of the STF is the story telling approach to career counselling which is being developed in the cultural contexts of Australia and South Africa. Individuals in all country contexts tell stories. In telling their stories, individuals also live their stories (White, 1992) which provide a key to understanding their actions and identities (MacIntyre 1985). The telling of stories and the crafting of future stories requires individuals to engage in a reflective learning process (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). However, Krumboltz (1996, p. 75) claimed that a task of career counsellors is 'to generate learning experiences for their clients' and he urged career counsellors to be less concerned about whether their clients were making decisions and more focused on whether their clients were learning. Thus Krumboltz emphasised the process rather than the outcome of career counselling.

Process is central to the STF and also to the story telling approach. Consistent with narrative career counselling, connectedness, meaning making and agency are fundamental to the story telling approach. Connectedness reflects the dynamic systemic underpinning of the story telling approach and the recursive interaction that occurs within and between individuals' systems of influence. Meaning making occurs as individuals recount their stories in order to make sense of their experiences, as in the case of career counselling. Agency reflects a belief that individuals have taken an active role in the construction of their stories, their ability to tell stories and also to enact future stories. Such stories, because of their systemic nature, enable the cultural location and subjective experience of an individual's career development to be appreciated.

Two further constructs of the story telling approach are learning and reflection (McMahon et al., 2012a), constructs which have been less of a focus in other narrative career counselling approaches. Indeed, learning and reflection are recursively connected in the story telling approach. Insight into how learning and reflection are conceptualised in story telling may be drawn from its parent theoretical framework, the STF (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Specifically, the STF conceptualises career counselling as a learning system in which counselling is regarded as a learning process, career counsellors as learning facilitators and individuals as lifelong learners striving to make sense of their life experiences. Thus learning is a dialogical and cognitive process (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) as well as a transformative process (McMahon et al., 2012a) that is brought about through reflection. For instance, the recursive processes of connectedness, meaning making, reflection, learning and agency result in transformation as individuals arrive at a different end point or a new understanding of the same end point (McMahon et al., 2012a). In the dialogical process in the story telling approach, individuals tell stories of their experiences and, by reflecting on those experiences at both objective and subjective levels, transformation occurs. Such learning informs the construction of their future stories.

The story telling approach and culture

The stories told by individuals are not created in a social vacuum (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002). Similarly, the emergence of narrative approaches such as story telling has not been created in a vacuum. Part of the challenge for our field has been the need to reconsider career guidance theory and practice that is more sensitive to the needs of non-dominant groups and that takes into account the broader sociopolitical location of individuals' stories (Stead & Watson, 2006; Watson, 2009). The story telling approach facilitates the telling of stories that are embedded in cultural and historical contexts (McMahon et al., 2012b) and which have been told within families, communities and societies for many years (Combs & Freedman, 1994). Thus, career stories reflect the cultures in which they are constructed and told (McAdams, 2006).

The cultural location of stories told by individuals is graphically illustrated in the following example from research conducted in the South African context (Watson, McMahon, & Collett, 2011). Participants were interviewed individually in a reflective process guided by the qualitative career assessment instrument, My System of Career Influences (MSCI; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005a, 2005b). The MSCI is an application of the STF that provides individuals with the opportunity to diagrammatically map the systemic influences on their careers prior to exploring and telling stories about these influences with a career counsellor. In so doing, the cultural embeddedness of stories (McMahon et al., 2012b) can be foregrounded.

In the South African example, both parents and their adolescent were interviewed. Sisa (a pseudonym) is a 16-year-old black South African adolescent who attends a private middle class school. His parents lived through and remember the apartheid era. Both parents are educated and do not want their son to struggle as they have. In the past and present cultural context of South Africa, there is considerable pressure within previously disadvantaged communities for adolescents to choose careers that gain parental approval. While Sisa's parents are intensely proud of their culture, language and heritage, Sisa attends an English-speaking middle to upper class school which is attended by predominantly white students. Sisa's mother laments: 'Sisa doesn't like colour . . . I see that as a weakness'. By contrast, Sisa explains that, '. . . like 90% of the time I am like around my white friends type thing and so like my, the mother tongue has like kind of slipped away from me . . . I think that culture is backwards'. Sisa's mother's story is reflective of Bruner's (2004) assertion that individuals are born into culture. Sisa's story is also reflective of an acculturation process that has seen him adopt the culture of his white peers rather than that of his parents. The narratives of culture shape the stories told by individuals (Bruner, 2004; MacIntyre, 1985) as in the case of Sisa and his mother. Indeed, Sisa's identity is being crafted in the context of his roles and relationships (McAdams, 2001). Thus cultural tensions are apparent in the stories told by Sisa and his mother about his future which provide useful insight for narrative career counsellors.

In narrative approaches to career guidance such as the story telling approach, listening to the stories told by individuals is fundamental; however, understanding the source of the narrative is also critical for, as MacIntyre (1985) claims, individuals are part of stories that existed long before they were born. In the case of Sisa, his sociopolitical, cultural and familial contexts influence the stories he tells and lives as well as the expectations placed on him. Indeed, Sisa's identity is being constructed

and co-constructed (Cohen, 2006) in his cultural, familial and sociopolitical contexts. Such cultural contexts can set boundaries or provide opportunities (Stead, 2004); Sisa's parents want to provide him with opportunities that were not available to them because of the boundaries imposed on them in the cultural context of the Apartheid era of South Africa's history. Through the storytelling of Sisa and his mother, the core constructs of narrative career counselling are evidenced. For example, the recursive *connectedness* within and between systems of influence such as socio-political history, geographic location, socioeconomic circumstances, families, communities and individuals is reflected in Sisa's story. Understanding Sisa's mother's present story of her hopes and dreams for her son is best facilitated through connectedness to her past stories of oppression in South Africa's political history.

Sisa's stories may be understood through his connectedness with a different period of history, growing up in a more privileged background and mixing with a predominantly white friendship group. Through the telling of such stories, *meaning making* occurs as previously disconnected stories are connected through the themes that are identified. In relation to the story telling approach, the *reflection* brought about by eliciting stories about the lives of the individuals assists in meaning making and subsequently *learning* and new insights that contribute to the co-construction of future stories. In the interview excerpts above, both Sisa and his mother made statements in relation to culture which are followed by a period of reflection during which they made meaning of their statements and learned something relevant to Sisa's career decision making. Due to the active role of the participants, *agency* is fostered in the career counselling process itself as well as in the construction and enactment of future stories. Further, stories evidence the complex recursive interplay within and between the systems of influence that attests to the usefulness of systemic approaches to career counselling such as narrative approaches.

Through the telling of stories, underlying themes emerge that permeate past and present stories and provide a scaffold for a future story (McMahon & Watson, 2011). For example, the themes inherent in the stories of Sisa's mother are those of determination, struggle and bettering herself and of a strong and proud Black heritage. For Sisa, his Black heritage is less important, as evidenced through his acculturation and consequent gradual loss of the language. Thus Sisa and his mother individually have constructed different future stories for Sisa which suggests that systemic rather than individual interventions may be appropriate (Arthur & McMahon, 2005).

In career guidance, crafting a future story and a future identity must take account of the stories clients have told. Indeed the future story will be grounded in the stories of past and present experiences (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2011; White, 2007), experiences which are culturally constructed (Cohen, 2006). Gergen and Gergen suggest that future stories must be believable and actionable. In essence, a believable story is one in which individuals can see a relationship between their future story and their present and past stories. Because of that relationship, individuals may also believe that their story is actionable. In this regard, Oyserman and James propose conditions that are indicative that individuals will take action in crafting a future identity. Primarily, Oyserman and James suggest that the future identity must be important to individuals and that individuals must see a connection between the identity they are crafting, the actions they are expected to take and their present identity.

Narrative career counselling, as illustrated by the example of the story telling approach, provides a reflective space in which individuals tell their stories in a 'conversational partnership' (White, 2007, p. 263) and learn from those stories about the future identity that is possible, its relationship to their past and present stories, and the elements required to enact it. Narrative career counsellors have a facilitative role to play in this partnership, as can be seen from the example. In particular, stories of culture may be elicited in intentional ways such as the use of qualitative career assessment instruments. Further, as suggested in the case study, career counselling an individual is only one possibility and a greater depth of understanding about an individual's situation may be elicited through systemic intervention (Arthur & McMahon, 2005). For example, systemic interventions with Sisa and his mother may be more beneficial than working with Sisa on his own. Indeed, in the example of Sisa a systemic intervention suggests the need for 'generational' career counselling when adolescent career decisions reflect the transitional cultural context in which they live. Thus a critical component of narrative career counselling is systemic thinking that takes account of context, is non-linear in its approach and that minimises over-simplification of complex multi-faceted careers.

Conclusion

'I can't go back to yesterday – because I was a different person then' (Carroll, 1865). The Cheshire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* suggests that the future direction 'depends a good deal on where you want to get to'. There is considerable agreement in the field that career guidance needs to become less expert and assessment driven, more culturally and contextually sensitive and more inclusive of qualitative and subjective processes. Narrative career counselling has emerged as a viable future response to these identified needs. This article demonstrates narrative career counselling's potential contribution in providing a meaningful and useful experience for career counselling clients. Further, the article demonstrates how narrative career counselling can assist individuals in crafting identities that are sensitive to their cultures and contexts.

Note

1. Story telling is the term used to refer to a specific narrative approach (McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2012). Storytelling is used to refer to a generic principle of narrative approaches in career counselling.

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