Exploring changes during life and career design dialogues

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article describes the processes of change that occur during career counseling based on the 'making oneself self' model (Guichard, 2008; Guichard, 2009). This counseling intervention process forms part of the more general paradigm of life designing (Savickas et al., 2009). The main goal for this counseling is fostering "reflexivity" of individuals with regard to their investment in their various spheres of life. Three career counseling interviews were conducted using both methods of dialogues for life and career design dialogues (LCDD) and self-confrontation (Larsen, Flesaker, & Foundation, 2008; Valach, Michel, Dey, & Young, 2002). Each interview is described with a focus on the changes perceived by the interviewees in relation to their initial reason for consulting as well as on their dialogues with the counselor, who facilitated these changes and provided support for them. The analysis of the dialogues suggests the existence of a three-step evolution supporting the changes. On the basis of these data, the discussion examines the reflexive approach in its theoretical, methodological and practical dimensions.

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1. Introduction

Life and career design dialogues (LCDD) (Guichard, 2008; Guichard, 2009 ; Collin & Guichard, 2011) aim to help clients identify desirable future prospects, both personal and professional, that may give meaning to their lives, and to specify the means to achieve them (Savickas et al., 2009). The dialogues occur over three or four interviews between a counselor and a client lasting approximately one hour each and taking place over a period of a few weeks. These dialogues refer to a model of self-construction (Guichard, 2004, 2005) that combines various approaches from psychology, sociology, philosophy, semiotics, and psychoanalysis to understand factors and processes of subjective identity construction.

To explore the processes of change that occur during LCDD, we conducted three interviews using this methodology. We sought to answer two main questions: What changes occur during these counseling sessions from the point of view of identity? What are

the precise factors that determine these changes during the dialogues? In order to reveal these changes, we used a research design that included a self-confrontation procedure. Because this specific methodology also involves a reflexivity situation, it offers an opportunity to analyze these dialogues optimally in order to observe these changes.

This article consists of four parts. The first part presents the 'making oneself self' framework and the associated LCDD methodology. The second part describes three case studies applying LCDD (methods, participants, measures and procedures). The third part analyzes the changes that were common to the three cases. The focus is then on how changes occur during dialogues and their effects on self-construction. The last part discusses how to facilitate reflexivity processes during LCDD by using self-confrontation methods.

2. Theoretical framework

The 'construction of the self' model is based on the idea of subjective identity described as "a Dynamic System of Subjective Identity Forms" (DYSSIF). In other words, a subjective identity is seen as plural (comprising subjective identity forms), unified (a system) and changing (dynamic).

A Subjective Identity Form (SIF) is defined as a composition of (a) a set of ways of being, acting, interacting and dialoguing in a certain setting; (b) certain visions of self, of others, and of objects signifying in this setting; and (3) expectations about self in this setting.

A subjective identity is formed by various SIF, each corresponding to a present, past or anticipated life domain or role. Some SIF occupy a more prominent role than others at a given time in a person's life and as such may be considered as core to the person's DYSSIF. A core SIF corresponds to a life domain or role in which a person wishes to achieve something highly significant to her or him. A core SIF is often linked with the expectation of achieving a goal that is important to the person. This goal corresponds to an Expected SIF (ESIF). Frequently, a core SIF is connected to one or more SIFs that played an important role in the person's past. For example, an empirical study (Szejnok, 2012) of young people preparing for high-level athletic competitions showed that the "top athlete in my sport" SIF was a core one in their DYSSIF. This SIF was connected to a specific ESIF: they saw themselves in the future on an Olympic podium. For many of them, these SIF and ESIF referred to an important past SIF (e.g. many of these athletes were initiated in their sport when they were young children by someone who mattered to them).

SIF and DYSSIF are transformed according to the events marking the course of a person's life and to the ways in which, on one hand, the person feels, interprets and symbolizes them and, on the other hand, acts. Such events include maturation, learning, encounters, fortunate or unfortunate accidents, aging, etc. Their role in the dynamism of the DYSSIF is both immediate (e.g. an accident can compel a person to give up his/her job) and mediated by the meaning made of the event by the person. Two forms of reflexivity combine to create such a meaning (Wiley, 1994). Dual reflexivity aims to stabilize the system while ternary reflexivity endorses its evolution. Dual reflexivity is a mode of relating the self (as a future subject) to the self (as a present object) from the perspective of a certain state of perfection or of a certain ideal that the person wants to achieve (Lacan, 1977; Erikson, 1959; Foucault, 1982a, 1982b, 1983). This form of reflexivity leads the person to define and implement behaviors that aim at achieving this state of perfection by moving purposefully from the presently experienced situation to the desired future situation. For example, it is because the young high-level athletes daydreamt about themselves on an Olympic podium that they made the efforts required to get there.

The second form of reflexivity plays a leading role in the transformations of the SIFs' system. It is called "ternary" or "trinity" (Peirce, 1934; Colapietro, 1989; Jacques, 1991), as the reflection takes the form of a continued dialogue between "I" and "You" that activates the correlative "He/She," which means I considered from the point of view of *You*. Identity processes integrate the three positions of (a) speaking as *I*, (b) being spoken to as *you*, and (c) being spoken of as *he/she*. The individual as an *I* must be capable of receiving a communication as a *you*. Also, the individual must be able to recognize self as a third person in a discourse about *he/she*. Thus, *I*, *you*, and *he/she* are the three agencies of personal identity. Personal identity requires taking into account the three poles of communication acts, that is, *I* speaking about me, being spoken to by others as a *you*, and being spoken of as a *he/she*. This dialogue with *you* and with *he/she* can be interpersonal, with two or three people interacting in person. It may also be intrapersonal in the mind of the *I* who thinks from the *you* and *he/she* positions whom are structurally present within the self.

Life and career design dialogues (LCDD) help clients to articulate the three agencies of *I*, *you*, and *he/she*. A dialogue is organized in the following way: (1) "I" says (something) to "You" ("You" = another or myself), (2) "You" understands "something" – called an 'interpretant' by Peirce – about the "something" that "I" said. (3) On the basis of this interpretant, "You" answers (something) to "I", who in turn produces an interpretant about this saying by "You". And so on … At each turn in the dialogue, a gap occurs between what "I" says and what "You" hear about what "I" said: a gap between what "I" says and what "I" hears "He" or "She" (himself or herself) said, from the perspective of "You." What "I" said is heard from the viewpoint of the other and, for this reason, is opened up to a spectrum of possible interpretations. This form of reflexivity is particularly active when people are wondering about the future prospects that could give meaning to their current lives. They engage in dialogues with themselves, with relatives, or with a counselor, during which they select – in their (past, present or even possible in the future) lives – some experiences, events, thoughts, etc. By saying to "You" (oneself or another) each of these experiences (events, etc.), "I" hears it from the perspectives of various potential external points of views (some "You" who might produce such or such interpretant about what "I" said). An experience, (event, etc.) that is thus "said and heard from the perspective of potential "You" acquires a certain independence from the particular features of a subjective event (emotions, representations, beliefs, etc.), in which it was entangled before being said. Therefore, "I" can connect it, compare it, combine it with other experiences (events, etc.), which were