



Life Design Counseling: A study on client's operations for meaning construction

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the adequacy of the micro-theory of client operations to explain meaning construction during Life Design Counseling. Four adolescents were interviewed about their second counseling session. Their recollections were stimulated through the replay of counseling videotapes. The resulting transcribed interviews were qualitatively analyzed. Results confirmed a sequence of client operations evolving from the symbolic representation of experience and reflexive self-examination towards making new realizations and revisioning self. Moreover, clients reported negative and positive session moments evidencing that clients' attention and activity during the session was not restricted to meaning construction operations. Practical implications for life design counseling are derived from the results and discussed.

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1. Introduction

Life Design Counseling (LDC; Savickas, 2011a) is grounded in a conception of human functioning as a continuous process of self-organization which allows ordering experiences and future anticipation (Savickas, 2013). This process, occurring through meaning construction, is fundamental to individual development and adaptation (Watson & Greenberg, 2006). In its use, the narrative symbolization of experience is one of the processes by which self-organization is made possible.

To support an individual's meaning construction for career construction, LDC evolves throughout three counseling sessions. In the first, the counselor uses a semi-structured interview, the Career Construction Interview (CCI; Savickas, 2015), to evoke micro-narratives of the client's life story. The focused topics are: (1) role models for self-construction; (2) magazines, television shows, or websites for manifest interests, (3) a favorite story from a book or movie which establishes the script for the next episode; (4) common-sense sayings or life mottos for self-advice; and (5) early recollections to provide a perspective on the present problem or transition.

In session two, the aim is to help the client in the construction of a narrative that provides coherence to micro-narratives referred to in the previous session. In that sense, the counselor helps clients in elaborating the core problem of his or her

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life, identifying needs and promoting their attainment by formulating goals. Awareness of this core theme is fundamental because it allows the construction of a narrative, in which past, present and future are continuously and coherently connected and integrated (Savickas, 2011a). Finally, in the third session, the focus is on the establishment of links between life themes and career plans.

Throughout the counseling sessions a co-construction relationship between the counselor and the client is fundamental to achieve meaning construction. This context is facilitative of various processes: analysis of clients' subjective experience of their career micro-narratives; exploration of emergent representations; and construction of an identity story with continuity and coherence. All these are aimed at helping clients in planning new possibilities of self-construction in different career roles (Savickas, 2015).

1.1. LDC and meaning construction

To better explain how clients symbolize narratively their experiences in LDC, Savickas (2015) proposed that initially, clients should develop symbolic representations of experience through attempts at articulating micro-narratives. The subsequent reflection on these experiences is needed in order to understand its origins and their congruence with current needs, interests, and goals. In the third stage, the client elaborates on new realizations allowing the development of macro-narratives of experience and new intentions. Finally, clients revise the self by formulating alternative ways of being and seeing which are expressed, for example, through the construction of new career plans.

This sequence of client operations for meaning construction was originally developed in the framework of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT; Greenberg, Rice, & Elliot, 1993). The therapeutic task of systematic evocative unfolding was analyzed to understand clients' operations in solving their own reactions that they feel are puzzling or too extreme (Watson & Rennie, 1994). In this therapeutic task, clients are requested to focus on their emotional experience and, therefore, their first operations are a symbolic representation of experience and reflexive self-examination. These operations allow the articulation and the description of their internal and external experiences as well as the reflection on these experiences, respectively. Client operations evolve into making new realizations and revisioning self, corresponding to higher-level operations that allow a more global self-understanding and the emergence of alternate ways of being and acting (see Watson & Rennie, 1994 and Greenberg et al., 1993 for a detailed description of clients' operations and the systematic evocative unfolding therapeutic task, respectively). Since meaning construction occurs in the matrix of interpersonal experiences, Watson and Rennie's (1994) study also considered clients' accounts of their positive and negative experience during the sessions, defined session momentum. Findings revealed that positive momentum was associated to a sense of camaraderie and teamwork with the therapist, while negative momentum related to difficulties to meet the therapist's requests.

Research on change during LDC supports the process of meaning construction described. Grounded in the Innovative Moments Model (IMM; Gonçalves, Matos, & Santos, 2009; Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves, & Duarte, 2014a, 2014b; Cardoso, Janeiro, & Duarte, 2016), studied meaning construction during LDC through the analysis of innovative moments. These refer to moments during the counseling dialog in which the client challenges the repetitive and redundant problematic self-narrative by introducing novelty in his/her usual way of behaving, thinking and feeling (Gonçalves et al., 2009; Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Silva, Mendes, & Sousa, 2016). Results revealed that clients' narrative transformation begins with the understanding of the problem, identification of life themes and the emergence of a new self-representation. Subsequently, the client's behavior evolves to more frequent expressions of well-being, and references to new career plans and behaviors to implement them. This change of pattern mirrors the one suggested to describe clients' operations in LDC (Savickas, 2015). In accordance, there were findings showing that clients perceive that LDC allows the improvement of self-discovery, self-awareness, connection, and sense of direction (Cardoso et al., 2016). All these could be seen as expressions of reflexive self-examination and making new realizations.

1.2. Study goals

Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of client operations was developed in the context of EFT (Greenberg et al., 1993) and as far as we know, no empirical study addressed the adequacy of this theoretical proposal to LDC practice. To fill this gap, the study presented here used Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR; Kagan, 1975) to analyze client operations and their experience of a LDC session. Based on Savickas (2015) proposal for the sequence of client operations and in research on the LDC process (Cardoso et al., 2014a, 2014b; Cardoso et al., 2016), it is expected that the sequence of client operations in LDC will be in agreement with Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of change on client operations. Thus, by focusing on client operations and their session momentum this exploratory study contributes to our understanding of meaning construction in LDC.

To achieve this goal, the second session of the LDC process was chosen for its importance to narrative identity construction. In fact, this session is dedicated to the identification of a life theme in order to facilitate the reorganization of clients' life episodes and, consequently, the re-writing of their narrative identity. Accordingly, research has shown that this session is evaluated by clients as LDC's most useful session to promote self-discovery, self-awareness, sense of connection and sense of direction (Cardoso et al., 2016). Moreover, research has also revealed that clients' narrative innovation rises significantly during this session.

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