



# How career construction counseling promotes reflection and reflexivity: Two case studies



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined which components of the process and content of counseling for career and self-construction fostered reflection and reflexivity in two clients. The study used the Interpersonal Process Recall procedure and client descriptions of important moments to investigate client reactions to counseling. The goal was to identify which components of the counseling content and process prompted client reflection about the past and present as well as reflexivity about the future. The most important content was the discussion of role models and early recollections. The most important process was revisiting past thoughts and actions, suggesting how past stories related to the present situation, and empathic responding to deep emotions.

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## 1. Introduction

Counseling for career construction aims to bring about change and forward movement in clients' lives. It entails much more than merely helping people make career choices. Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves, and Duarte (2015) maintain that "career plans are one of the mechanisms by which individuals give order and intentionality to their existence" (p. 11). Savickas (2015) states that career counseling aims to help people construct careers, shape their identities, and design successful lives. This aim can best be achieved by enabling people to take responsibility for authoring their career-life stories: "Your life is a biography of choices. You have to construct your trajectory" (Long, 2015, p. 3).

During the past few years, interest has increased in finding ways to determine not only how successful career counselors are in achieving the above aim but also the success of psychological interventions in general (Niles, 2003; Savickas, 2011a). Blustein (D. L. Blustein, personal communication, February 10, 2016) also believes that researchers are consistently endeavoring to assess the effectiveness of psychological intervention including career counseling. Ægisdóttir et al. (2006), and Tracey, Wampold, Lichtenberg, and Goodyear (2014), too, declare the keen interest of career counselors in determining the success of the counseling process. Here, success is defined in terms of whether the clients benefitted from the career counseling intervention and also whether the intervention helped the career counselors better understand the clients' experience of the intervention.

The success or usefulness (Savickas, 2011a) of psychological intervention can be determined in various ways, including inviting clients to complete evaluation forms at the end of sessions and administering psychometric instruments to gauge the effect of the intervention. Researchers and practitioners are also showing increased interest in engaging with clients in a narrative manner to

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ascertain their experience of the counseling process, their emotions and thoughts during and after the intervention, and what were the most meaningful moments. Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) has proved itself useful in achieving these aims.

The present research contributes to understanding the effectiveness of career counseling by addressing the three questions central to the present Symposium about Research on the Process of Narrative Career Counseling:

- What changes during the intervention?
- What elements prompt these changes?
- How was reflexivity fostered and developed?

## 2. Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR)

IPR has been described as “a qualitative interview approach designed to access client and caregiver experiences as close to the moment of interaction as possible” (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008, p. 19). Clarke (1997, p. 93) explains that the IPR idea originated when Kagan (1980), while watching supervisors re-examine videotape recordings, “[became] aware of and commented on a wealth of inner experience which they [the counselors] recalled on seeing the video” and realized that the counselors were able to probe more deeply into attitudes, emotions, and ‘hidden’ meanings embedded in original interactions on reviewing the interactions. Kagan and his colleagues (Clarke, 1997, p. 94) subsequently devised and refined “a sensitive and non-invasive method for prompting a person to help them retrieve many of the passing thoughts, hopes, fears, risks, images, feelings, decisions and perceptions that had run through their minds too fast to be dealt with at the time of the original interaction.”

Analysis of what actually occurred during key moments in career counseling provides career counselors with important information on the impact and meaning of the intervention. Clients' understanding can be improved in many ways – IPR being one of them. In fact, the central aim of IPR is to enhance clients' insight into key moments during any kind of intervention (e.g. therapy, career counseling, and vocational guidance); moments that often pass unnoticed unless therapy sessions are carefully scrutinized.

Many researchers adapt IPR to suit their particular research needs, yet the following aspects of the technique are considered ‘generic’ (Clarke, 1997; Elliott, 1986; Kagan, 1975, 1980; Watson & Rennie, 1994). First, a counseling session is video-taped and viewed by counselor and client within 24–48 h of the initial recording. Second, clients remain in control of the situation and may choose when to stop or start the recording and how much time should be spent on reflecting on certain sections. Third, discussions should focus on what was happening ‘then’ (at the time of the recording) rather than on ‘now’ (while watching the recording). Fourth, prompts should be used to enhance the quality of clients' subjective experiences revealed during reflection. To facilitate deep understanding of what actually occurred during the intervention, segments of the video during which there are periods of silence lasting at least 3 s should be watched twice and reflected on.

## 3. Career and life construction theories

The intervention in the current research (conducting the Career Construction Interview (CCI)) was informed by career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2005, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) and life construction theory (LCT) (Guichard, 2005, 2013).

### 3.1. Career construction theory (CCT)

Career counselors who draw on CCT from a social constructionist perspective endeavor to help clients focus on central patterns of personal meaning (career-life themes), which can be identified by analyzing past memories, scrutinizing present experiences, conjecturing about future aspirations, and focusing on clients' deepest feelings and emotions. Career counselors and their clients thus work together to reconstruct and co-construct a life portrait that weaves together clients' multiple micro-narratives into a larger macro-narrative. In other words, the aim is to elicit clients' evolving career-life stories and to clarify the personal meaning that clients attach to these stories and, in doing so, to better understand clients' sense of self (Savickas, 2005, 2015). The life portrait is then used in autobiographical reasoning as the client considers how to cope with the career challenges and problem(s) they face.

### 3.2. Life construction theory (LCT)

Guichard's approach concentrates not on career construction but on life construction (Guichard, 2004; Guichard, 2009; Collin & Guichard, 2011). This approach's core concept is that of “dynamic system of identity forms”. This expression refers to what is generally called “subjective identity”, which is here considered as plural (=made of subjective identity forms), unified (=a system) and in evolution (=dynamic). “Subjective Identity form” (SIF) is defined as a composition of (1) a set of ways of being, acting, interacting and dialoguing in a certain setting; (2) certain visions of self, of others and of objects signifying in this setting; and (3) (more or less important) expectations about self in this setting. At a given time in a person's life, one (sometimes two) SIF(s) has/have a more important role in this person's system of SIF. Such a core SIF corresponds to a life domain in which this person wants to achieve something “as such”. For many adults, their professional career is a core SIF. According to this approach, the dynamism of this system of SIFs originates both in the events that impinge on a person's life course and in the way this person makes sense of each of them. Two kinds of reflexivity combine in this meaning making. One of them is called ternary or trinity as it is a (inner or with someone) dialogue implying a circulation in mind between the three positions “I, you, and he/she. When this ternary reflexivity is about life construction issues, it allows the person to select some elements from his/her past,

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