



Creative writing for life design: Reflexivity, metaphor and change processes through narrative



Reinekke Lengelle PhD^{a,*}, Frans Meijers PhD^b, Deirdre Hughes PhD^c

^a The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Lectoraat Duurzame Talentontwikkeling, Johanna Westerdijkplein 75, 2521 EN Den Haag, The Netherlands

^b The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Lectoraat Pedagogiek van de Beroepsvorming, Johanna Westerdijkplein 75, 2521 EN Den Haag, The Netherlands

^c The University of Warwick, Warwick Institute for Employment Research, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

To survive and thrive on the labor market of the 21st century, individuals must construct their identities in a process of meaning making, where identity is co-constructed in the form of a narrative. In order to better understand the nature and elements involved in this career-identity change process the Interpersonal Process Recall interview (IPR) method was used to examine the results of a two-day Career Writing (Lengelle, 2014) intervention. The exploration regarding what prompted changes and how reflexivity was developed, was done by having each of two participants bring in pieces written during the course and having the interviewer ask what thoughts and feelings were remembered at the time of writing. The IPR process revealed that Career Writing enables participants to first enter into feelings, then make sense of those by finding the 'right' words to describe them, and experience (by thinking and feeling) that their 'new story' makes sense on a gut level and provides meaning. This process is made possible by an internal and an external dialogue where various I-positions (voices within the self) speak and where metaphors and analogies concretely facilitate meaning making.

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1. Introduction

In response to a rapidly changing, increasingly insecure and complex labor market, career counselors and researchers are developing methods that can meet the needs of individuals who would navigate this new terrain. In the last two or three decades, narrative career counseling practices (Cochran, 1997; McMahon & Watson, 2012; Reid & West, 2011; Savickas, 2012) have been developed to promote career adaptability (Savickas, 2011b) and career resilience (Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015). Narrative counseling (i.e. career construction) is founded on the idea that in order to survive and thrive on the labor market of the 21st century, individuals must reflexively construct their identities in a process of meaning making, where identity is co-constructed in the form of a narrative: a story about one who one is that provides both meaning and direction (Wijers & Meijers, 1996).

Perhaps the most well-known and elaborated narrative theory and approach is the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). The idea behind this theory is that individuals attribute meaning to their vocational behavior and that this meaning "is held in implicit themes that weave through explicit plots that compose the macronarrative about vocational identity" (Savickas, 2011a, p. 26). The plot and life theme are often about something that feels as if it is missing in life; something that individuals need or for which they yearn. Indeed, the progress from need to goal has the potential to transform an individual because, "career construction relies on the idea that people organize their lives around a problem that preoccupies them and a

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: soulwork@tic.ab.ca (R. Lengelle).

solution that occupies them” (o.c., p. 32). In practice, career construction knows three parts, “during the first act clients construct their careers through short stories, during the second act practitioners reconstruct the small stories into a large story, and during the third act client and practitioner co-construct a revised identity narrative, new intentions, and possible actions” (o.c., p. 43).

However, several things in Career Construction Theory behoove further examination. How for instance does the transformation of feelings into stories take place and how does that process unfold within the individual? What practitioners do is “try to help clients elaborate their statement of a career problem in feeling terms. Career construction practitioners follow the emotions, those feelings that signal to clients that something requires their attention and moves them to seek counseling. (...) Emotions provide the fulcrum for revising the self during counseling. Before meaning may be reorganized and action engaged, feelings must change” (o.c., p. 53). Although the theory explains how strong emotions often surface in the telling of early childhood recollections, it is not clear what elements in the process allow feelings to change and become new understandings.

Second, the role that the practitioner plays in the learning process of the client is not entirely clear. In transforming micro-narratives into the macro-narratives the task is “to transform scattered images and emotions into experience vignettes that reflect a clear and coherent theme that others could begin to understand” (o.c., p. 68). In order to be able to do this, practitioners need to have a ‘poetic creativity’ based on intuition and empathy which is needed to embrace a story, allow space for negative sensations, get a sense of the story’s mood, notice the pain and tolerate ambiguity (o.c., p. 69). But, what is this poetic creativity exactly and in what way does this creativity interact with the learning process of the client?

The question that may lead to answers is to know what is happening within the client and to track the learning of the client in more precise detail. As the client is assisted by a practitioner to co-construct a new narrative – or as in this research, is facilitated in a process of career writing – what is happening as the two co-construct a new, more life-giving narrative? Another way of saying this is, what is happening in the inner journey of the client or student?

This inner journey that is embarked upon during career construction has been studied in part by Meijers and Lengelle (2012). In their examination of identity theories that are at the foundation of career learning, they have contributed two additional dimensions to narrative work in the field. First, they stress the importance of Gendlin’s (1981) view that identity learning consists of the client’s internal shift in experiencing as a result of accurately representing an internal sense. Therefore, they refer to Law (1996) who describes career construction as a learning process that goes through four stages: sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding. In the sensing stage thoughts and feelings are given room to be expressed in their full range without censoring or a need to interpret or understand – it might be called ‘mapping’ the territory. In the sifting stage several possible key themes are identified. It is a sorting out of what was mapped. In the focusing stage a key theme is identified that requires deepening and broadening. And in the understanding stage a clear insight is gained into the preoccupation or dilemma, whereby a struggle or question is reframed, accepted or made meaningful.

Second, Meijers and Lengelle (2012; see also Lengelle & Meijers, 2015) argue that the engine behind this learning process is dialogical in nature and depends upon an internal and external dialogue. While Career Construction Theory clearly shows the external dialogue and the facilitator’s role in uncovering the internalized story, this emphasis on cultivating the internal dialogue and understanding its dynamics is an important addition.

The dynamics of the internal dialogue can be made visible with Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In this theory the Self is seen as “a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions” (Hermans, 2013, p. 83), built from the repertoire of various spatial and temporal positions encountered as an individual lives his life within society. These may be internal positions with a distinctive inner voice and personal history (e.g. I as man, white, teacher), external positions i.e. an ‘other-in-the-self’ (e.g. the voices of my mother, my daughter) or outside positions (actual people or groups in the outside world) (Raggatt, 2012, p. 31). Although the various positions are involved in relationships of relative dominance and social power, each position functions as a relatively autonomous author able to tell its own story from its unique spatial and temporal perspective. The self is constantly bombarded with new experiences, events and contacts, which spark decentering and centering movements in the process of positioning, repositioning and counter-positioning. New possible positions may be appropriated, leading to potential reorganization, negotiation, promotion, demotion, and integration into and within the existing I-position repertoire (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

From the perspective of Dialogical Self Theory, the internal dialogue can be described as a conversation between various I-positions that has beneficial effects when the initial conversation is broadened and deepened (e.g. more I-positions than normal begin to participate in the conversation; positions marginalized are given voice) and results in the development of meta- and promoter positions (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2013).

When two or more positions act in service to each other meta-positions develop. On the basis of meta-positions promoter positions can emerge, which represent an individual’s ability to become action-able (Ligorio, 2012). That said, the expression of I-positions, and the way in which they lead to expanded I-positions and ultimately to meta- and promoter positions has not been examined in detail. The questions that follow are: how and under which conditions do new I-positions get expressed and expand and what are the bridges between the positions that lead to meta- and promoter positions?

Our hypothesis is that metaphors play a crucial role in the development of I-, meta- and promoter positions because they form a bridge from emotions to new understandings. They do so because metaphors (1) resonate with the emotional brain (Ricoeur, 1978), (2) are specific and clear enough to be put into words (Maassen & Weingart, 1995) and (3) are fuzzy enough to leave room for expansions and interpretations (Jaszczolt, 2002).

Metaphors make communication and interaction possible between I-positions (i.e. giving voice to life experiences in an internal dialogue) and with others (an external dialogue) by providing a ‘common ground’ for making sense of communicated images, concepts and emotions and thus facilitating the creation of new ways of making meaning (Barner, 2011). They allow the transfer

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