



Reflexivity in life design interventions: Comments on life and career design dialogues



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ABSTRACT

Papers published in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life Design Interventions show that narrative innovation develops from a focus on structuring the past to increased engagement in projecting some future prospects. Counselees are energized by the interventions: They become more self-determining. All operations involved in the interventions (basically: telling someone about different life elements identified by the person as important because they are emotionally invested) allows a passage from emotion to cognition (or more precisely: a passage from a felt - emotional - temporal continuity to an expressed temporal continuity), which determines a meaning of life for the concerned person (or a meaning of a fraction of his/her life). The dialogic interactions at work in counseling interventions appear to be the fundamental factor that fostered reflexivity and led to these changes: the situation of dialogical counseling - because of its specific characteristics - stimulates the use of cognitive processes of interpretation, which appear to be the key factor determining the changes.

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These comments on the papers published in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life Design Interventions are organized into three parts. The first one expresses some general considerations on the relevance of Life Design Interventions in the context of the challenges that the world must now face. The second part comprises three subparts that summarize the responses that the different studies have brought to each of the three questions that were asked to contributors to this special issue (What changed during these interventions? Which elements determine these changes? How was reflexivity fostered and developed?). And the last section highlights the differences between the methodologies used in these studies and offers some ideas for further research.

1. Relevance of life design interventions in the context of the challenges that the world must now face

All the articles in this Symposium describe and analyze counseling interventions aimed at helping counselees to design their lives. These studies were conducted in different countries from Africa, America, and Europe. The interventions took place with very different people: high school and college students, active laborers, job seekers, people close to retirement, men, women, etc. These pieces of research join many others on similar topics, published in recent years, in various scientific journals or in books. This strong development of this kind of intervention shows that it fits the question that concern people who live in contemporary societies which are called post-modern. Two fundamental characteristics of these societies require that people living in them must, more than in other kinds of societies, decide for themselves the direction to give their lives. On the one hand, they are

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“societies of individuals” (Elias, 1991): societies in which individuals are thought to be responsible of directing their lives (unlike other societies in which such responsibility is attributed to some collectives – family, community, clan, etc. – of which each individual is seen as a member only). Moreover, these post-modern societies are described as “liquid” (Bauman, 2000): it means that people find in them, less than in solid societies, some stable landmarks (as established ideological systems, a single religion, a life-style seen as “normal”, etc.) that provide them with a solid ideological framework for giving meaning and direction to their lives.

It is to help people cope with such an individual responsibility that counseling interventions for life design were conceived. Differently from our domain’s previous interventions of vocational guidance and career development, which revolved around the notion of paid work, the life design approach asserts that the essential element to be considered is the meaning that individuals seek to give to their lives. This change of perspective can be seen as the equivalent in our field at the turn of the 21st century of the Copernican revolution in the 16th century’s cosmology. Indeed, both vocational guidance and career development tended to consider that paid work was the core of the counseling interventions (in the same way as the Ptolemaic system assumed that the earth was the center of the universe). Differently, life design considers that the construction of life meaning needs to be the core of the counseling interventions (in the same way as Copernicus’ thought that perspective should be heliocentric). This doesn’t imply that life design disregards work. On the contrary! It asserts that work – because of the kind of activities it involves, of its products and of the types of exchanges it implies – plays a key role in the construction of our world, of humankind and of each worker’s self. Along with Henri Bergson (1911), life design considers human beings as “Homo faber”, as beings who manufacture their world and themselves in manufacturing things. Thus, for the life design approaches, work activity is a key element in the people’s construction of life meaning. But, for these same approaches, work designates a much broader phenomenon than paid jobs. It includes all types of product exchanges (ranging from those that give the producers recognition only – as is the case with creators of art pieces that are perceived as such in their communities but don’t find buyers – to paid employments, and to reciprocal gift-giving exchanges in traditional societies, etc.). Work thus refers to jobs, to craftsmanship, self-entrepreneurship, local systems of trade, domestic activities, etc.

This renovated conception of work, promoted by the life design approaches, allows for an adaptation of career interventions to the major stakes of the contemporary world. Indeed, most of the interventions of vocational guidance or of career counseling or education, designed during the 20th century, focused on access to the current occupational functions and, especially, to paid employment. These interventions were designed to prepare clients to become ideal candidates for occupational selections that included them in the current world of work, a world in which the concerns of decent and human working activities and of a sustainable human development were by no means a priority. But, as the title of UNITED NATION 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (which was unanimously voted during the General Assembly on September 25, 2015) asserts, our fundamental purpose – as human species – must now be of “Transforming our World”. And as this Agenda posits, among the transformations that must be done, is the promotion of sustainable development via decent work for all. The Life design interventions allow for the introduction of such reflections on decent work and sustainable development when people construct future perspectives that give their lives meaning. Indeed when people – individually or by the means of collective reflections – design their lives, they are able to consider questions of the following type: through which kinds of decent work activities – that contribute to sustainable development of a planet of 10 billion inhabitants – can I (can we) design my (our) life (lives)? And because of the impending world crises that are at the basis of this UN Agenda, people will probably do it more and more often.

The innovation represented by the life design considerations was also made possible because from the last third of the 20th century forward, the perspectives from which human and social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, specialist of semiology, etc.) considered that human subjects have changed. Four major changes can be underlined. First, human subjectivities are now seen as less unified than previously. Human subjects are now described as “plural” (Cooper & Rowan (eds.), 1999; Lahire, 2010), as speaking with different voices (Gergen, 2011), as combining different “I” positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), as made of a collection of various self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986), as composed of different “subjective identity forms” (Guichard, 2005; Guichard, 2009), etc. Second, these new approaches to “plural” human subjects describe them as searching to give their lives unity, coherence and meaning. They do so notably through the elicitation of certain life themes (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979) and the construction of life stories or auto-biographies (Delory-Momberger, 2009; Ricoeur, 1992) around some plots, which give meaning, from a certain future perspective, to a certain selection of their past and present life events. Third, behaviors are seen as less immediately determined by the individuals’ early or past experiences than was the case before. Differently, these new looks on the human subjects insist on the importance of the meaning constructing processes (Malrieu, 2003), of (re)interpretations and symbolizations (Wiley, 1994), of dialogues (Jacques, 1991) and of the various modes of relating to the self and to one’s experiences (Foucault, 2010), etc., in the determining of human self-conceptions and behaviors. As a consequence, fourth, human actors are now conceived as endowed with a greater (at least potential) agency than before (Bandura, 2006). Such a potential agency is one of the common presuppositions of the papers published in this Symposium on the Process of Narrative Career Counseling. And, as we shall see now, one of the major outcomes on the Life Design Interventions implemented for this research is a fostering of such a personal agency.

2. Summary of responses provided by these different studies to the three questions that were asked to contributors

The goal of the present research was to answer the three following questions:

What changed during the life design interventions?

Which elements determine these changes?

How was reflexivity fostered and developed?

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