



Reflection and reflexivity during life-design interventions: Comments on Career Construction Counseling



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ABSTRACT

The 8 articles in the Symposium advanced understanding of “Reflexivity in Life-Design Interventions”. This discussion highlights distinctions between reflection and reflexivity, as well as their relation to first-order and second-order change. Then the contributions of the Symposium authors are organized using four phases of narrative counseling: symbolic representation, reflective self-examination, reflexive new realizations, and revisioning career identity. The discussion concludes by organizing the diverse terms the authors used to name these four phases into a uniform format.

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The authors of the research reported in the Symposium on Reflexivity in Life-Design Interventions (Savickas & Guichard, 2016) designed their studies to address three questions: “What changes during life design intervention? What elements prompt these changes? How was reflexivity fostered and developed?” While reading the Symposium articles, I assumed a distinction between reflection and reflexivity. From the perspective of career construction theory, to reflect means to deliberate on past experiences or present circumstance. As a part of the life-designing intervention known as Career Construction Counseling (Savickas, 2011), practitioners prompt this serious thinking and careful consideration by conducting a structured interview, that is, the Career Construction Interview (Savickas, 2015). Client reflection about self, stories, and scripts produces concrete knowledge and prompts self-examination relevant to the current career transition. In the subsequent counseling session, counselors foster client reflexivity and prompt new action.

Although related to reflection, reflexivity differs from it. Clients use reflection to learn about self yet use reflexivity to change self in some way (Hibbert, Coupland, & MacIntosh, 2010). According to Rennie (1992) reflection involves self-awareness, while reflexivity involves self-awareness plus agency within that self-awareness. Reflexivity fosters a self-awareness that flows into intention. It leads to making decisions with self-awareness and taking action with personal meaning (Rennie, 2004). This sense-making activity enables individuals to change self and behavior. Thus for the Career Construction Interview, reflection involves client self-observation while subsequent reflexivity brings about change in self based on that reflection. The conceptualization of reflexivity in the life-designing intervention known as Life- and Career-Design Dialogues (Guichard, 2008) is similar to the Career Construction Counseling conceptualization. In Guichard’s counseling discourse, reflexivity means a “process of dialogic interpretation of the self” in which people “put into action their capacity to create and to define new perspectives when faced with transition situations” (Bangali, Masdonati, Fournier, & Goyer, 2015, p. 23). In short, both Career Construction Counseling and the Life- and Career-Design Dialogues conceptualize reflexivity as careful consideration of current issues that produces a new perspective to guide life choices (D’Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendex, 2007; Elliott, 2001).

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The agency within reflexivity refers to a sense of being able to take action (Walter & Peller, 1992). Reflexivity encourages biographic agency by reframing disruptions as transitions and turning points, then highlighting a connection to the future that links with continuities from the past. Clients can acquire ideas, information, and experience based on existing knowledge in a way that has new meaning. They also may reorganize what they already know. Projecting this narrative innovation into the future clarifies decisions and enhances engagement in career planning.

1. Client role induction

As a group the Symposium articles show the importance of positioning a client for the work to come. Of course the life-design interventions began by eliciting clients statements regarding their perceptions, confusion, indecision, and feelings about their career concern. The client's problem statement was followed by a discussion of the tasks and goals of life-design dialogues. To introduce life-design interventions, counselors must clarify what the Career Construction Counseling and life- and career-dialogues can and cannot do. Life-design interventions do not address all career concerns. They use narrative counseling methods, not vocational guidance, academic advising, nor occupational placement. Clients who seek guidance or advice may be dissatisfied with life-design interventions. To avoid this dissatisfaction, counselors must emphasize the client's core role and explain to clients that they will have to do most of the work of analyzing and thinking about issues. A discussion of life-designing goals and tasks plays a central role in developing a working alliance.

To initiate the working alliance, Career Construction Counseling begins with the question of "How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?" Maree (2016) noted that displaying an authentic desire to be useful to the clients created a relaxed atmosphere conducive to self-discovery and meaning. Two different cases reported in the Symposium articles showed the importance of using this question to develop a working alliance. A client described by Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2016) had difficulty in answering the question. At first Thelma wondered if she was to tell the counselor how to help her. Later Thelma reported that she found the counselor to be very helpful in being persistent about the opening question. In a second example, Reid, Bimrose, and Brown (2016) described a client who was recruited by another client. Susan may not have clearly envisioned her role in counseling. Susan seemed to want to quickly form a plan with practical steps. Susan was upset by the question about how counseling could be useful to her. Then she seemed resistant and defensive because she felt forced to answer the Career Construction Interview questions which intensified negative emotions about her situation. She may have preferred the interventions of vocational guidance or occupational placement. At the beginning of counseling, both Thelma and Susan seemed to feel vulnerable rather than secure in the relationship.

When client goals align with life-design intervention goals, clients experience feelings of security in the relationship. Then they feel safe in engaging in dialogues that deconstruct and then reconstruct their career stories (Taylor & Savickas, 2016). The client described by Cardoso et al. (2016) expressed feelings of relief in stating that "It was like freeing myself. It was saying what I thought. I felt better, lighter...". Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2016) reported that Thelma also expressed relief in being able to talk about her problem with someone. She explained that her "parents completely stopped talking about this after I quit my engineering studies". When clients believe that they are being heard and feel validated, they reflect more deeply on their career narratives.

2. Client processes in the performance model

The Symposium articles described how clients reacted when counselors implemented life-design interventions. The Interpersonal Process Recall sessions further illuminated client "internal operations, subjective experience, and intentionality" (Watson & Rennie, 1994, p. 500). Life-design interventions reported in the Symposium articles promoted client development and adaptation through a continuous process of self-organization that allowed clients to order experiences, construct meaning, and form intentions. Watson and Rennie (1994) have conceptualized a performance model that describes this ongoing process of self and career construction. As I read the Symposium articles, I used their performance model of client operations to identify client activities and changes. The sequence of client operations in life-design intervention (i.e., both Savickas' Career Construction Counseling and Guichard's Life- and Career-Design Dialogues) followed closely the contours of Watson and Rennie's (1994) micro-theory of change. First, clients formulated symbolic representations of experience by articulating micro-narratives. Second, they reflected on these representations to understand how they had constructed self and career as well as to illuminate current needs, interests, and goals. Third, clients conceptualized new realizations through formulating a macro-narrative or life portrait. Finally, clients revised their career identity through envisioning realistic alternatives, stating new intentions, and forming action plans. These four phases as they appeared in the life-designing process reported in the Symposium articles each merit further elaboration.

3. Symbolic representation of experience

The results reported in each of the Symposium articles showed that clients used cognitive and affective processes to symbolize their careers and heighten self-awareness of their needs. Narrative symbolization of experience is the most basic operation that makes self-organization possible. It involves recollecting as a means to articulate career-relevant experiences and then re-experiencing them to elaborate their meaning. Helping clients to symbolically represent their career and life biographies enabled them to reflect on past experiences and present situations. Symbolization seemed nurtured by a counselor's expectation that clients tell stories about their career and life. This was true for both counselors who conducted the Career Construction Interview

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