



Career construction counseling: A thematic analysis of outcomes for four clients



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ABSTRACT

Thematic analysis was used in this study of career construction counseling with four diverse, purposively-selected participants. After the intervention, the participants who sought and received career construction counseling were interviewed to determine their experience of the intervention. The results showed the value of career construction counseling in bringing about change in the participants' career-life stories.

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1. Introduction

The world of work has undergone dramatic changes following the global economic meltdown and related developments over the past few decades. The resultant uncertainty, insecurity, work trauma, and feelings of 'stuckness' experienced by many employees as the form of work changed from stability to mobility to meet the labor needs of postcorporate societies called for an innovative, adaptive, flexible response from counselors and clients alike. This response included the rethinking of existing career counseling theories; the design of new strategies, techniques, and assessment instruments (narrative instruments in particular); and a move away from using objective approaches in isolation.

This transition coincided with a shift in career counseling toward a focus on subjective aspects of clients' career-life stories. Hartung (2011) argued that people draw on their emotions to maintain equilibrium between their personal needs and the demands of changing environments "in a homeostatic process of organismic self-regulation" (p. 302). He adds that the disregard in terms of both theory and practice shown by career development and vocational psychology specialists for the subjective, lived experiences of clients has strengthened the view of career counseling as a simplistic, uninspiring, detached, and objective endeavor.

These developments should be interpreted against the background of fifth wave phenomena in the global economy. Gurri (2013) believes that two largely incompatible global forces are currently competing for domination of the career life at all levels. Hierarchies reflected in metaphors of pyramids, ladders, chains of command, and pecking orders characterized work contexts until a few decades ago. They represented conventional power structures marked by disregard for individual workers, a top-down approach, bureaucracy, centralization, and an almost mindless insistence on loyalty and obedience to one organization. This approach made little provision for the subjective experiences of employees. Self-reflection in career counseling was often stifled. In contrast, postmodernism is characterized by global connectedness and networking as well as by impermanence, unrestricted participation at all levels, immediacy, and

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ample allowance for emotion, creativity, and innovation. The pendulum has swung strongly toward appreciation for feelings, passion, and freedom of expression, and the sense of being listened to by people at all levels and at all times.

Career counseling should focus on the subjective aspects of people's career-life stories “specifically [on] fostering goal directedness, shaping purpose, constructing meaning, increasing narratability, and promoting intentionality in life-career design” (Hartung, 2011, p. 302). Krumboltz and Chan (2005), too, confirm the importance of accepting the inevitability of change, embracing its effects, and preparing clients to do likewise. The notion of choosing and committing to a specific career for a lifetime is no longer viable. Moreover, interests change over time, and “[r]emaining ever open-minded is the smartest way to adapt to change” (p. 351). This helps explain the move toward an integrated, qualitative + qualitative approach and the use of qualitative and quantitative, and objective and subjective methods of career counseling assessment, data gathering, and counseling to elicit career-related information (Maree, 2014). Emphasis is placed on encouraging and enabling clients to express their deepest emotions and passions more openly and thereby help them identify deep-seated strengths and motives. Innovative techniques are used to empower clients to a) reflect on their career and life stories, and b) reflect on these reflections to initiate self- and career construction through appropriate action and movement forward.

2. Definition of concepts

Hartung (2013) maintains that the discipline of career counseling has transitioned through the following three waves of theory and intervention.

- a. Matching people to jobs.
- b. Managing numerous roles in the course of a person's life span.
- c. Designing contemporary approaches and strategies to help people make (instead of find) “meaning” through their work and relationships. Assessment and intervention should therefore aim to improve clients' employability, enhance their career adaptability, and help them assume authorship of their career and life stories (Savickas, 2011).

To come to terms with changes in the world of work, workers themselves have to change on personal and work-related levels. Scholars have devised new “order-creating” terms to describe 21st century work situations and workers' responses to the accompanying changes. Two terms that have specific relevance for this article are discussed below. “Protean careers” mean careers where employees remain resilient so that they can deal with the effect of new technologies and new developments in the world of work on their work lives (Baruch, 2004; Hall, 1996). “Boundaryless” careers, on the other hand, denote a move away from traditional agreements with organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

3. Career- and self-construction counseling

Savickas (2005, 2014) career construction discourse was used as the theoretical and conceptual framework for analyzing and interpreting the data in the present study. This framework explains career from an action-orientated perspective that blends personal meanings, past memories, current experiences, and future objectives into life themes that evolve over time. The subjective career is shaped by actively creating meaning, while work-related actions are guided, regulated, and supported. Moreover, the subjective career comprises biographical reflexivity that is constructed conversationally and operationalized through work-related behavior. Guichard (2010) maintains that the career construction perspective offers an integrated view of people who inspire change in specific communities whereas the self-construction perspective sees people as attempting to promote change by merging different aspects of their (personal) existence. Whereas career construction counseling is concerned with the importance of change in enhancing the meaning of career in the life of any person, self-construction counseling is concerned with what changes can be achieved in life to make it more meaningful. Both career construction and self-construction need to be considered in order to enable people to survive if not always thrive in the 21st century economy.

The need for individuals to design emotionally gratifying lives (and redesign them as the need arises) has received much attention in recent times. It has, however, become progressively more difficult to achieve this aim (Savickas, 2014) following the move away from “fixed” truths and “guaranteed” employment in a “stable” world toward the uncertainty brought about by fourth and fifth wave changes in the world of work and their impact on the financial and emotional lives of workers (Guichard, 2009). Increasingly, people struggle with escalating change and subsequently find it more difficult to create emotional “holding” environments (Winnicott, 1987) for themselves and their families in the face of escalating discontinuity (Savickas, 2007). Career construction and self-construction therefore acquire new meaning and significance and can be facilitated by asking clients to write and enact their career-life stories to help them regain a sense of emotional security and stability through building biographical bridges and reconstructing their (often severely impaired) sense of self. In other words, to help them embrace and appreciate change as an opportunity to redesign themselves and to move forward in harmony with a changing world.

4. Working assumption for the study

I, the author of this article, assumed that career construction counseling, culminating in the crafting of clients' life portraits, could demonstrate how people could use their stories (self-constructed ‘scripts’) to identify and articulate their most profound needs and, eventually, draw on these scripts to change themselves and move forward.

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