



## Narrative innovation in life design counseling: The case of Ryan



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### ABSTRACT

The main aim of this research is to study the patterns of narrative change in a case of life design counseling (LDC). The innovative moments coding system (IMCS) was used to conduct an intensive analysis of the career counseling sessions. This coding system is grounded in a narrative conception of the self, and suggests that narrative change results from the elaboration and development of narrative exceptions to a client's core problematic self-narrative. The results supports the adequacy of the IMCS to the study of change in career counseling and reveal that the intervention promotes a pattern of change characterized by three types of innovative moments: action, reflection, and protest. The results are discussed taking into account their implications for career counseling theory, research and practice.

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### 1. Introduction

Life design counseling (LDC; Savickas, 2011) is a meaning-making approach to career intervention. Based on the epistemology of social constructionism, LDC emphasizes the role of narrative thinking for understanding and intervention in the career construction process. From this perspective, career is the macro-narrative regarding an individual's path along the work role throughout their life-span (Savickas, 2013). To support career construction, LDC aims to help clients re-author their narrative identity and project new possibilities for self-construction into their career roles (Duarte, 2011).

This intervention approach is generally organized into three distinct moments, usually corresponding to three sessions. Session one is oriented by the administration of the career construction interview (CCI; Savickas, 2011), a semi-structured interview through which the client introduces him/herself and elaborates upon relevant episodes of his/her life story. The counselor inquires concerning five topics: (1) role models for self-construction; (2) magazines, television shows or websites for manifest interests; (3) favorite story from a book or movie for the script for the next episode; (4) sayings or mottos for advice to self; and (5) early recollections for perspective regarding the present problem or transition.

Session two is dedicated to helping the client provide coherence for the life episodes addressed in the prior session. Through a co-construction process, client and counselor explore possible meanings within the five topics previously addressed, which will predictably enable the client to identify a life theme, thereby yielding coherence and a sense of continuity to the life episodes reported.

In session three, the client formulates realistic career plans built upon his/her recently reorganized narrative identity. In this sense, the process of career construction is integrated into the client's psychosocial functioning at work and will influence other life roles.

In summary, the career problem is conceptualized as a meaning construction problem (Cardoso, 2012), the resolution of which implies the rewriting of life's micro-narratives into a macro-narrative, where career experiences and expectations reinforce the

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coherence and continuity of life stories. In an attempt to elucidate this developmental process, we conducted a preliminary exploratory study that analyzed the process of change of a client's self-narrative throughout LDC (Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves, & Duarte, 2014) and investigating the development of novelties (innovative moments) along the counseling process using the innovative moments coding system (IMCS). Previously, we studied a client that underneath his vocational indecision had a self-narrative that was centered on the theme of sadness on the school-to-work transition impasse. In this study, we were guided by the same research question – how do clients reconstruct meanings during the three sessions of LDC? – to analyze a case without a self-narrative saturated in a problematic theme underneath his career problem. Thus, this second study aims to add a new case-study to the previous research, investigating if this same pattern emerges with a different case. In both cases, career counseling involved three 50-minute sessions with a week in between the sessions.

This line of research addresses the need to analyze the processes and mechanisms that lead to effective change in career counseling (Heppner & Heppner, 2002; Whiston & Rahardja, 2008) in general and in the life design framework (Savickas et al., 2009) in particular. In fact, we know that LDC is effective both in individual counseling (Rehuss, Del Corso, Glavin, & Wykes, 2011) and in a group format (Di Fabio & Maree, 2011); however, the processes and mechanisms of change remain unclear.

To address these questions, we conducted an intensive analysis of the LDC process using two methodological tools originally designed to study narrative change throughout the psychotherapeutic process (Gonçalves, Matos, & Santos, 2009; Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Mendes, Matos, & Santos, 2011): (1) the innovative moments coding system (IMCS; Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Mendes et al., 2011) to track narrative innovation and (2) the return to problem coding system (RPCS; Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Stiles, et al., 2011) to track ambivalence.

### 1.1. Change from the perspective of innovative moments

There is currently a significant body of empirical data suggesting that innovative moments (IMs) – behavioral, cognitive, and/or emotional exceptions to the problem that brought the client to therapy – are involved in therapeutic change across different clinical

**Table 1**

Examples of innovative moments vis-à-vis a helping others dominant self-narrative underlying career decision-making problem. From Gonçalves et al. (2010). Adapted with permission.

IM type/content	Example
<b>Action</b>	
New coping behaviors facing anticipated or existent obstacles	C: This weekend I was able to talk to my husband about the possibility of leaving my job
Effective resolution of unsolved problem(s)	
Active exploration of solutions	
Restoring autonomy and self-control	
Searching for information about the problem(s)	
<b>Reflection: creating distance from the problem(s)</b>	
Comprehension reconsidering causes of problem(s) and/or awareness of effects	C: I realized that changing my job wouldn't necessarily leave my family in a helpless situation.
New problem(s) formulations	
Adaptive self-instructions and thoughts	
Intention to fight problem(s)' demands, references of self-worth, and/or feelings of well-being	
<b>Reflection: centered on the change</b>	
Therapeutic process: reflecting about the therapeutic process	C: Yes, these sessions have helped me to see my indecision otherwise. That makes me feel good, makes me believe that I will be able to solve the problem
Change process: considering the process and strategies implemented to overcome the problem(s); references of self-worth and/or feelings of well-being (as consequences of change)	
New positions: references to new/emergent identity versions in face of the problem(s)	
<b>Protest: criticizing the problem(s)</b>	
Repositioning oneself toward the problem(s)	C: I've enough of worrying about the others. What about my life, my plans, where do they fit?
<b>Protest: emergence of new positions</b>	
Positions of assertiveness and empowerment	C: Now it's time to fight for myself, of choosing what I feel is the best for me. I also want to be happy, feel fulfilled, just be me.
<b>Reconceptualization</b>	
Always involve two dimensions: (1) description of the shift between two positions (past and present) and (2) the process underlying this transformation	C: Not knowing which direction to take, or which decisions and choices to make to find myself... It made me feel confused, without peace. Now it's different. To know where we are, what we want and the career we want to embrace gives us peace and tranquility.
<b>Performing change</b>	
Generalization into the future and other life dimensions of good outcomes	CC: The implementation of the new career plans is changing your way of living?
Problematic experience as a resource to new situations	
Investment in new projects as a result of the process of change	
Investment in new relationships as a result of the process of change	
Performance of change: new skills	
Reemergence of neglected or forgotten self-versions	C: Yes, yes. I am starting to see that I can't forget about myself, not only at work but also in other dimensions of my own life. Before I just did tried to answer to everybody's needs but now I am making time to do things that I really enjoy, that actually make me feel alive.

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