

# Shaping the Story

## A Guide to Facilitating Narrative Career Counselling

Kobus Maree (Ed.)



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## A Guide to Facilitating Narrative Career Counselling

*Edited by*

Kobus Maree  
*Pretoria, South Africa*

Including contributions by Larry Cochran, Mark Savickas, Norm Amundson,  
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# Prologue: Reshaping the story of career counselling

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Entering the work world and moving through occupational positions requires more effort and confidence today than it did in the modern industrial era. Working in the postmodern global economy entails more risks because, in a substantial way, jobs are being replaced by assignments and organisations by networks. Once taken for granted, matters such as job security, healthcare and pensions have become problematic. Individuals can no longer plan to work for 30 years developing a career within the boundaries of one organisation. Instead, they can expect during their lifetimes to occupy at least ten jobs, more properly called assignments. Healthcare, which was once the province of the employer, is now the concern of the employee. Pensions that once consisted of defined benefits promised by an employer are now reconstituted as defined contributions to a retirement plan managed by the employee.

The shift in the social arrangement of work has left individuals more responsible for managing their own lives. During the twentieth century, the company provided a holding environment. After workers matched themselves to an organisational position and were selected to occupy it, they could count on the organisation providing a grand narrative for how their lives would proceed. The company defined what shift they worked, where they lived, how they spent leisure time, whom they befriended and how much money they had. Similar to how a crib held them as a baby, their family held them during childhood and their peer group held them during adolescence, the organisation would hold them during adulthood. In the postmodern world, employees can no longer depend on an organisation to provide them with a familiar and predictable environment to hold their lives. Instead, individuals must rely on themselves to construct a story – a self

and a career – to hold themselves and their lives together when they encounter discontinuity. As they move from one assignment to the next they must let go of what they did but not of who they are. If they let go of everything, then the loss may overwhelm them. By holding onto the self in the form of a life story that provides meaning and continuity, they are able to move on in a way that advances narrative lines and actualises overarching goals.

To better assist clients in scripting and narrating their stories, many career counsellors have concluded that they must transform their practices. A transformation to meet the needs of postmodern living requires that the counselling profession formulate narrative models and self-construction methods that enable clients to articulate stories that hold the self. The metaphor of holding returns our view of career to its root meaning of cart or chariot. Rather than the path traversed during the industrial era, career now means the vessel that carries us forward. Simply stated, from a narrative perspective career becomes a carrier of meaning; and by extension, career counselling becomes a dialogue designed to infuse meaning into vocational choices and substantiate the self through work.

In response to clients' need to construct their own holding environment by scripting their stories, many career counsellors have embraced social constructionism and made the narrative turn. Narrative career counsellors help individuals move into their own story and learn to hold it, so that in the end the story can hold them and quell their uncertainty. Their narrative construction of self and career becomes the structure that provides meaning and direction as they encounter transitions that involve a loss of place, position and project. Yet as the authors in this volume explain, a clear and coherent story does more than just hold tension. Constructing the story turns tension into attention, and telling the reorganised narrative expresses intention.

In telling their stories, clients come into closer contact with their life experiences. Furthermore, telling expresses meaning and makes that meaning evident to both client and counsellor. As clients tell their stories, their lives start to add up. Story by story, they build the architecture of a larger narrative. Slowly they begin to consolidate narrative lines as they recognise the repetition of themes and, in due course, identify the underlying logic of the progression. As they make implicit meanings more evident, they evoke wider dimensions of meaning. Then they may elaborate and revise these dimensions of meaning to push back constraints and open new space for living. This revised narrative states what they already know about themselves and reorganises it into a life portrait that honours intuition, stirs the imagination and reveals intention. At the beginning of counselling, many clients are strangers in their own lives. At the end, they are able to use work to become more whole as they infuse their projects with their own purpose and plans.

The narratologists who have contributed chapters to *Shaping the story* discuss and demonstrate how counsellors facilitate meaning-making as they exercise narrative competence in validating client stories and apply biographical reasoning in positioning those stories in a social context. As a group, the authors breathe new life into career counselling models by examining the poetics of personhood and the politics of work. As individuals, the authors offer innovative methods to help

clients shape their stories and attune them to the work world. Because of the inspiration and instruction presented by the authors, this volume contributes substantially to shaping the story of the career services profession itself by showing how, in the global economy, stories supply a sense of continuity, coherence and commitment. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate how stories are improved by a good listener.

This book explains how counsellors, as good listeners, can use the relationship to help a client construct a self that alchemises his or her life into an aesthetic project of career. As clients reconstruct and reorganise their moving biographies, the counsellor serves as a validating witness to the emergent formation of a self that is in the process of producing new positions and projects. The client cannot fully comprehend this emergent self from within because it is created in the dialogue between client and counsellor. Understanding is better accomplished between people than by insight within a person. As a witness, the counsellor can explore the meaning constructed in the stories a client tells. The counsellor may also inquire about what the story evades, distorts or conceals; gently alluding to what the client wishes to hide – the secret that makes the story whole. The counsellor, of course, encourages clients, to the degree that they are ready, to openly declare who they are and become expert witnesses to their own world. As the first audience to a new production, a counsellor provides words that help to sum it up from an outside perspective. The counsellor carefully selects stabilising language that the client can use to hold the newly emerging self in place. Then, together, the client and counsellor can use this coherent and convincing narrative organisation of the self to generate plots that resolve career problems and shape work life. In addition to resolving the presenting concern, the counsellor's clear and compassionate retelling of a client's story aims to inspire and encourage the client to enter the next chapter of her or his life story.

*Shaping the story* succeeds superbly in meeting the goal of explaining how a good story about the self encourages a client to make career changes while holding onto a self that is even more vital and intentional. In fact, the authors accomplish this goal so well that the astute reader will conclude that they also tell an exciting story about how the profession of career counselling can transform itself to meet the needs of clients living in a postmodern society. As shaped by the editor, this volume offers career counsellors a story to hold onto as they reposition themselves in the global economy and renovate their profession for the information age. In telling the particulars of this story, the chapter authors' identify possibilities for transforming the career counselling profession that will inspire readers to consider what career intervention might become and will encourage counsellors to enter the world of narrative career construction. As counsellors do so, they will become better positioned to witness, validate and celebrate the radiant singularity of their clients' lives and careers.

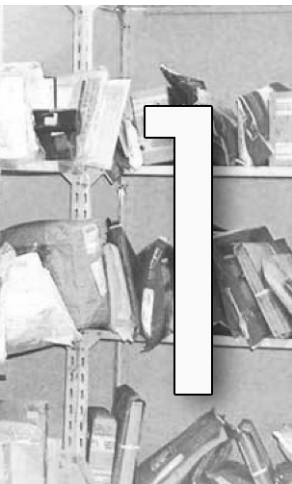


S E C T I O N

1

# Theory





# The promise of narrative career counselling

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## **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a selective overview of narrative career counselling, but with the purpose of showing the promise of the approach. A promise is futuristic and usually optimistic, dwelling upon what has been done and what is yet to be done. In this chapter, three areas of promise are briefly explored. Firstly, the narrative approach offers a way to work with personal meanings, a topic that is recognised but neglected in the standard, objective view of career counselling practice. Secondly, the approach is developing with appropriate strategies and techniques for scripting a person with a meaningful role in his or her own life story. Thirdly, the narrative approach to career decision-making can be extended indefinitely to other aspects of career such as a job search.

The classic distinction between “I” and “Me” (James, 1890) can be regarded as a distinction between self-as-narrator and self-as-actor (Sarbin, 1986). As a narrator, a person draws upon past and future to interpret and organise the present. As an actor, a person lives the present, attempting to get something done or having something done to him or her. The webs of meaning that the narrator spins might enrich or impoverish action. The actions an actor takes or undergoes might resonate with or deviate from a narrative pattern. In any case, all kinds of novelty, difficulty and opportunity are likely to arise, challenging the narrator to refine or extend the story.

Accordingly, the focus of narrative career counselling is twofold. On the one hand, the purpose is to engage the narrator to spin the larger story of one’s life and career in a way that bodes well for the future. On the other hand, the purpose is to strengthen the actor to become a more powerful agent of or main character

in this story. The aim of this chapter is to show the promise of the narrative approach to career counselling, briefly exploring the areas of personal meaning, life history and career services.

## **1.2 Career values**

Some career difficulties can be managed by providing occupational information, interpreting test results, or guiding someone through a computer program. The value of such an objective approach to career counselling is not in question. Through test development, computer program construction, and workbooks, among other things, its accomplishments are numerous and impressive. The limitation of this approach, however, is that it leaves out personal meaning, the realm of story that a person actually lives.

For many people experiencing life's discontinuities, the issue is not so much what occupations match one's measured interests and aptitudes, but how one's life story might be continued in a meaningful way. Graduation, immigration, divorce, job termination, retirement and waking up to a mid-life transition mark problematic episodes of life that might call for something more for fruitful resolution, and it is this "something more" that is lacking. As it is currently practiced, career counselling lacks the depth to address issues of meaning. While there is no reason to impose depth on every client there is every reason to have available the capability to reach the depth required to resolve career problems.

Consider the common occurrence of value conflict in evaluating occupational options (e.g. Cochran, 1986a). No particular option is apt to satisfy all career values. Thus, to satisfy some values, a person might have to sacrifice other values. Across the array of options, there is typically a pattern in which one set of occupations satisfies one group of values while another set satisfies a different group. Within a selection of options, some values might be incompatible with other values. For example, salary might conflict with use of one's talents. Challenge might conflict with security or time with other things, such as family.

Using standard practice, a counsellor might not become aware that such conflicts exist. Even if one did, there would be little to do about it. As a practical matter, one might search for a perfect option that satisfied all values. Failing that, one might challenge the reality of the conflict or dismiss its importance, hoping things will work themselves out. Sometimes they do not. Osherson (1980) found that some career decisions were so compromised by conflict that people later experienced a loss of self, ushering in mid-life crises. A woman who struggles long hours to become a partner in a major law firm might well feel as though she were abandoning family. A man who works as a commercial artist might well feel as though his artistic talents were being wasted or sold out for security. In working, conflicts are abundant. In deciding, such conflicts are often anticipated reasonably well.

So what is at stake here? In facilitating a career decision, it is fundamental to explore personal values, what a person wants to realise in a career. Yet, in standard practice, there appears to be no way (or but superficial ways) to facilitate deciding when those values collide with one another. It is difficult to conceive of a more

basic shortcoming. If standard practice fails in this regard, what kind of approach is needed? It depends upon the nature of values.

In his text on the theory of values, Rescher (1969) states that a full exposition of evaluation involves value objects, loci of values, and values proper. In the present context, a value object is an occupation. A locus of value is a situated vehicle for the actualisation of a value proper. Typically, as stated, a career value is really a locus of values. For example, salary is not valuable in itself. Rather, it is of value in forwarding something else such as acquiring worldly goods most worth having. That something else is a value proper. It is an intangible part of a person's vision of how life ought to be. Conflict cannot be resolved adequately among loci of values for they are merely vehicles or means. Loci are important as ways to particularise values proper, but meaning derives elsewhere from the values themselves.

In his study of cultural differences in work preferences and performances, Sowell (1994) noted that different cultural groups are apt to hold similar values. Most groups would prefer more wealth to less, more security to less, more outlet for one's talents to less, and so on. Cultural groups and individuals differ about what they are willing to sacrifice to attain something else. Questions about value priority require what Taylor (1977), following Frankfurt (1971), calls second-order evaluation.

First-order evaluation is concerned with assessing how well various options would satisfy a particular desire. For example, would a desire for wealth be best satisfied in corporate accounting or corporate law? In contrast, second-order evaluation is concerned with evaluating the desires one has. Given two or more values, which is better? An answer to this question can resolve conflict by establishing which value has priority, what is important, less important or of little importance.

As loci, career values then are concrete ways to pose fundamental questions of living. Conflict casts one fundamental question against another. For example, a conflict between salary and use of talents might involve the question whether it is better to strive for the worldly goods most worth having or to become the kind of person most worth being. This question is still as formidable to us as it was to the ancient Greek philosophers who debated it (Feinberg, 1970). A conflict between security and challenge might ask if it is better to avoid troubles most worth avoiding or to approach achievements most worth achieving. Trying to answer these kinds of questions in the abstract is philosophy. Trying to answer them in the concrete circumstances of a person's life is career counselling from a narrative perspective.

The general aim of narrative career counselling is to script a person in his or her own life story. This focus is what makes the approach uniquely suited for an exploration of personal meanings and for helping resolve many kinds of problems involving meaning. To return to the example of value conflict, it does little to foster resolution by simply asking which value is more important. The question might provoke a quick answer or dead silence, but we want a substantial answer. As Taylor (1977) convincingly argued, questions of value priority are inseparable from personal identity. These fundamental evaluations (such as wealth versus personal excellence or security versus achievement) have at issue what ideals are to prevail,

defining the kind of person one wants to be and the kind of life one wants to lead. Without a grasp of personal identity, there is little basis for setting value priorities and for resolving conflict.

A narrative approach to career counselling is intended to clarify a person's life story and his or her role in that story. Standard, objective career counselling is not rejected, but rather incorporated into a larger view of practice that is capable of approaching the depth necessary for adequately resolving many career issues that have been beyond reach. Perhaps it is premature to claim efficacy in resolving conflicts or making fundamental evaluations, among many other issues, but it is not premature to claim that the approach is developing precisely towards these ends, dwelling in the arena where they can be accomplished. Phrased another way, second-order evaluation in career is indistinguishable from composing a role in a life story. Problems of meaning in career culminate in a larger pattern of meaning that offers the possibility of resolution.

### **1.3 The narrative approach**

A narrative approach to career counselling can briefly be characterised by three general propositions. Firstly, people tend towards and often achieve a unifying story of life. For example, a woman's happy childhood was disrupted when her father became ill. She was powerless to prevent the loss of her carefree family life just as, years later, she was powerless to save her father from a fatal heart attack. In college, she chose nursing. Now, as a middle-aged professional nurse, she devotes herself to patients with chronic illness, emphasising home care and family maintenance. While she could not undo the harm that was done to her own family, she can strive to minimise or undo the harm done to other families. Meanwhile, with her husband and children, she tries to maintain the close, cheerful atmosphere that she lost, yet one that is better prepared for facing life's inevitable upsets.

The pattern of meaning, evident in this example, is typical of what might be found in research and practice. A significant disruption or pattern of disruption kindles and focuses yearning. Unable to solve the engulfing problem in the immediate moment, the person explores and spins wider strands of meaning. Before the woman ever nursed patients, she had imaginatively helped her father over and over. As her awareness grew, she imaginatively helped sick members of other families, coming to appreciate more fully the devastation that sickness wreaks. Further, she explored and tried out nurse-like behaviours such as consoling or advising, taking on qualities of a nursing role. She was drawn to particular models, activities and courses. This forming composition of meaning is called a life theme (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979) or life plot (Cochran, 1990).

Eventually, a central task (mission, project) crystallises that enables a person to frame an active role in the world. Through enacting this role, a person fulfils meanings of the life plot and yearnings of prior experience. From the nurse's actions, new meanings arose which were woven into her orientation. New actions were cultivated and integrated within her role. Her occupational role as nurse housed a dramatic role that was charged with personal meaning. The unity of this

pattern of composing and enacting is the unity of story. Scholars have entitled lived unity in various ways such as a lifestyle (Adler, 1956), a life project (Sartre, 1966; Charne, 1987) or a personal myth (McAdams, 1993). However, the unity that we recognise in lives is not properly one of just style, project or myth, but of our common understanding of story and the ingredients that make up a story.

The range of unifying plot structures is unknown. The example above is but one instance. Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) provided a useful start in showing how life plots are formed and structured, identifying two patterns and several pivotal elements in structuring meaning. For example, to what does the person attribute cause for his or her engulfing problem? The nurse blamed disease, directing her towards medicine, but she could have attributed other causes such as lifestyle, diet or personality, leading in other directions. Does the person generalise from one's own situation to situations in general? Does the person then turn from solving one's own problem to solving similar types of problems experienced by others? If so, the person develops a mission in life. If not, the person might spend a lifetime still trying to solve his or her problem. Instead of becoming a nurse, the woman in the example might have become a health advocate for herself and her family, prescribing endless regimens of diet, exercise and relaxation. To extend the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie, a wide variety of life histories should be collected and examined.

Cochran (1990) found two other ways in which life plots form. In further research, he identified many pivotal experiences that help shape a unifying pattern of meaning in lives (Cochran, 1986b; 1991), such as experiencing a foretaste of a better life, practising a role, encountering a model or making a decision. Life histories are rich in resolutions and shifts in meaning, sometimes striking, often delicate. For instance, the sensitivity that made one a shameful baby in youth might also be the capacity that makes one remarkably artistic in adulthood. In small and large measures, these movements of meaning mark progress towards the formation of a life plot.

A broader examination of life histories offers the possibility of two types of gains, theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it is important to understand types of plots and their principles of composition. How plots are put together might indicate ways that they evolve or transform. Suppose, for instance, that the woman who became a nurse entered career counselling before she had generalised from her own family to families in general. By understanding the type of plot that is forming, a counsellor might consider helping her to make that generalisation, or at least to explore the possibility. A conceptual or theoretical understanding of plots enables a counsellor to discern how a change might occur. Ethical considerations determine whether one ought to try.

Owing to their structure, plots might differ in qualitative ways such as resilience, vulnerability or constructiveness. For some plots, the central task that emerges is destructive (consult Leyton, 1987, for chilling accounts of how highly destructive tasks take shape). For instance, suppose that someone's central task was to poison the atmosphere of whatever group he or she entered, perhaps as revenge for all of the groups that had previously excluded or chastised the person. Again, it is plot

structure that might guide change. For instance, the person based this destructive task upon antipathy. A more constructive task might emerge from considering where his or her sympathies lie (e.g. outsiders).

A practical reason for examining a wide variety of life histories is that what happens in lives might be incorporated as strategy or technique in career counselling practice. Pivot points of plot can be directly translated into practice. For example, encountering a model is a pivot point that is already part of established practice. Further, shifts in meaning within life histories provide potential ways to facilitate such shifts in practice. Clients enter career counselling with many kinds of issues that figure in a life plot. Some are reeling from loss. Some are overshadowed by siblings. Others are divided by conflicting dramas, one perhaps from a father and the other from a mother. The shifts and resolutions of meaning that occur in lives seem directly relevant to practical guidance.

The second general proposition is that lives lived in accordance with a constructive, unifying plot of life are more meaningful, productive and fulfilling. Forming a unifying plot is one thing. Living it is quite another. There are several reasons why such a gap exists.

One reason is that a life plot is an implicit pattern of meaning, not explicit enough to guide the choices a person makes. Consequently, one might make a poor career choice and end up in a situation in which it is difficult or impossible to enact a desired role. Another reason is that the environment is contingent. A person might be co-opted into situations that require a different way of living (e.g. a gang or militia, a parent's line of work, a church, etc.), stuck in confining circumstances, limited by available options, hindered by lack of training and ability, or disabled. A final reason worth mentioning is that a person is housed in a physical body with diverse urgencies and tendencies (e.g. Pinker, 2002) that might jolt one out of position, sometimes with such serious personal or social consequences that it is difficult to recover.

When a person is able to overcome difficulties and to begin enacting a desired role in a life plot, the proposition states that experiences would become more meaningful, productive and fulfilling. But, it is necessary to ask, more so than what? The answer is, more so than before. People who are struggling to get into position to enact a given plot describe themselves quite differently than when they are in position and acting. For example, Anthony Trollope (1978), the great English novelist, tended to be lazy and miserable until he began writing novels. In an abrupt change, he became industrious, more optimistic and fulfilled, and experienced life in a much more meaningful way. While before and after portraits are not always so pronounced in other life histories, there does appear to be a distinct difference.

For this kind of proposition, the proper form of research is replicated, single case studies, based upon life histories. In case study research (Yin, 1994), the logic of replication involves generalisation to theory, not to a population. Any well-founded failure to replicate disconfirms hypotheses, calling for abandonment or modification of theory. This standard is harsh and exacting, but fair and fruitful in theory building.

As an example of theory building, suppose that case studies reveal qualitative differences in life, apparently due to the nature of the central task formed. Perhaps a task that involves a broad generalisation yields richer experience than one that remains concrete and particular. Perhaps egocentric tasks dampen meaning, productivity and fulfilment. These sorts of findings would call for a modification or elaboration of theory. Perhaps cases involving destructive tasks disconfirm the proposition. If so, the scope of theory application would be bounded, suggesting the need for theory revision. At stake in this research is an understanding of how life plots influence the quality of career and perhaps how they can be shaped as better instruments of living.

The third proposition combines the previous two, attempting to reproduce in practice what is evident in life histories. Namely, career counsellors can help people to construct life plots and to actualise them in present and future enactments. The proposition involves two claims. Firstly, a career counsellor can help a person to uncover and shape a life plot that could be projected into future career possibilities. Secondly, a career counsellor could help a person to begin enacting the desired role in present opportunities, positioning him or her for future actualisations.

Perhaps the best description of a client entering career counselling is that he or she is clouded. It is not just that a life plot is a tacit pattern of meaning, but that the plot is clouded by distortions, negative assessments, recent influences, dubious connections and the like. Largely, the work of narrative career counselling involves an uncovering of thematic strands of meaning and the way that they form into a coherent whole. For the client, important connections might not have been seen before. The significance of particular desires, events, abilities and so on might not have been fully appreciated. In this sense, the function of a narrative career counsellor is to help clients see more clearly the meaningful patterns from their own life histories.

The work of a career counsellor might also involve some degree of shaping. Shaping is necessary because, for some clients, the life plot seems to be still forming rather than fully formed. Other clients are threatened with secondary plots that are diminishing, deviant or negative. For still other clients, the life plot needs to be brought into sharper focus.

Just as it is natural in life histories for people to confront different narrative possibilities, so too might they explore narrative possibilities in career counselling. Shaping narrative possibilities is a collaborative effort in which counsellor interventions are designed to minimise intrusion or imposition. For instance, a career counsellor might emphasise strengths rather than weaknesses, correct misguided lessons drawn from significant experiences (e.g. I always mess things up), or provide encouragement. Nevertheless, if a client is tending towards a self-defeating or destructive role in the story, more directive interventions are appropriate. The task of a career counsellor is to help a client uncover and shape, not any narrative possibility, but a possibility that is more ideal, constructive and reachable reflecting more fully who a client is and where he or she most wants to go.

Clarifying a life plot marks the beginning of active exploration. Projecting a dramatic role onto occupational roles is best not done from a distance. To facilitate realistic, dramatic rehearsals of work, it is important for a client to get as close as possible to an occupation. Through getting close by taking a course, interviewing workers, volunteering and the like, a person has an opportunity to take on a role and to reflect on it. Perhaps the nurse would have been even more fulfilled as a family physician or an emergency medical technician. Tests and other career resources might contribute to an answer, but active exploration is much more suited for constructing realities that one might enter.

As an approach, narrative career counselling arose from professors trying to reproduce in practice what they discerned in lives. Guided partly by theories of a constructivist nature, working partly by trial and error, they tried to piece together the ingredients of effective practice. Watkins and Savickas (1990) provided the first foundation for practice, spelling out appropriate strategies and techniques. They described three steps. Firstly, use clinical assessment techniques to clarify a life plot. Secondly, use interpretive methods to enhance understanding. Thirdly, use extrapolative procedures to link a life plot to future possibilities. Building on their work, Cochran (1997) developed a more general narrative approach to career counselling that emphasised practical wisdom (being able to specify ideals in practical circumstances) and a sense of agency (the sensed capacity to enact a desired role). Further developments are discussed in this volume.

It is worth dwelling briefly on why a narrative approach must stress agency. Composing a personal narrative does not necessarily result in an actualisation of that narrative. For example, the nurse could not undertake nursing if she felt that the role was beyond her capabilities. She would probably avoid it, haunted by visions of chronic and severe mistakes that harm rather than help. To actualise narrative, a person must become the agent of his or her own life story. Otherwise, one is threatened with yielding to lesser roles in divergent dramas, often with a failed, sometimes nightmarish tone. For this reason, a narrative approach concentrates as much on building a realistic but stronger sense of agency as it does on constructing a story line. Consult Cochran and Laub (1994) for a storied view of a sense of agency and Cochran (1994) for the significance of agency in career.

### **1.4 The normative story**

A career decision is highly individual in content, calling for an exploration of a person's ideals, interests, and abilities, among other things. To help a client make such a decision, we would have to know about the person. However, many issues in career are more normative, calling for an understanding of a social situation to which a person must adapt. For example, to help a client get a job, we would have to know how people find work generally in a particular culture or community. Similarly, there might be evolving or customary ways to advance in working, to resolve workplace conflicts, or to manage demands of work and family. In these cases, much of the guidance comes from without, not so much from within.

Norms for guidance arise, not usually because there is a clear, social arrangement (often there is not), but because numerous people have made their way or failed, and they tell anecdotes about their experiences. Regarding a job search, people might tell stories about salient features such as a deflating rejection, an interview with weird questions, or a scramble to put together a resumé. These stories define the way things are and what a proper role should be.

As Burke (1957) argued, the significance of a story is that it equips a person for living through the situation it defines. In the way a situation is defined, an attitude is implicitly or explicitly shaped. Filled out with actions, an attitude is a strategy for dealing with a situation. For example, a job interview might be construed as begging, selling or negotiating. It makes a great difference which attitude prevails. A beggar might grovel and crawl (one client, shortly released from prison, was extremely sensitive to how low he was expected to crawl). A seller persuades. A negotiator bargains. By the way a situation is characterised, one can project a cast of roles, lines of plot, motives and likely emotions. From this perspective, the stories that a person has available are a guidance system.

For illustration, consider a wonderful study of eighteenth-century French folktales by the noted historian, Robert Darnton (1984). Life for the French peasant was brutal, characterised by chronic hunger, constant insecurity and grinding hardship. In this world, there were two career paths. In the first, one stayed with village and family, working from dawn to dusk to ensure survival. In the second, one took to the road, still struggling to survive against bandits, fellow fortune-seekers and wolf packs. For both, the world seemed harsh and capricious, lacking a moral order. "If the world is cruel, the village nasty, and mankind infested with rogues, what is one to do?" (Darnton, 1984: 55).

According to Darnton (1984), French storytellers tried to answer this type of question (about the world and one's role in it) with materials at hand, including an existing repertory of folktales. They revised these stories to reflect current realities of the village and the road. The resulting tales had a distinctive style and communicated a "common way of construing experience" (Darnton, 1984: 64). In the end, "the tales told peasants how the world was put together, and they provided a strategy for coping with it" (Darnton, 1984: 53). To paraphrase Darnton, the world is composed of deceitful rogues (knaves, tricksters) and fools. Of these two roles, it is far better to be a rogue. In tale after tale, the advantage of being a trickster is elaborated, and the folly of being a fool (whether innocent, virtuous or pious) is revealed. As a whole, these tales provided a system of career guidance for French peasants in the eighteenth century.

In making one's way in the world, the modern person is not that different from the French peasant. To be oriented is to have a definable position within an intelligible context (see Cochran, 1985, on the nature of orientation). For most social arrangements, the position is a role and the intelligible context is a story. We differ from the French peasant in the stock of stories that are available for orientation.

Some communities are still close enough to have a common pool of stories regarding some task such as a job search. However, it is not necessarily the wise storyteller who is spreading the stories. It could be the lazy never-do-well who is excus-

ing his chronic lack of employment or a political activist spreading her resentment against rivals. A stock of stories is not necessarily very good. In this situation, a person would be seriously misguided.

Many communities are not close enough to have a common pool of stories. One might try to draw stories from relatives, friends or internet websites. In this haphazard effort, the anecdotal stories and advice one receives might be too scattered and fragmented to form an orientation. In this situation, a person would be seriously unguided. To paraphrase MacIntyre (1987), deprived of stories, we are left unscripted.

One reason why stories might be absent or flawed is that the social reality is often difficult to penetrate. Without research, who would have known that, in North America, most jobs are in the hidden job market? Who would have known that the best ways to tap the hidden job market would be through one's own network (relatives, friends, acquaintances) and through direct contact with employers? In other settings, there might be equally murky realities to uncover. Whatever the reason, in these muddled parts of career, people need good stories to become oriented.

As one example, consider the rags to riches novels of Horatio Alger (1832–1899). To my knowledge, the published works of Alger have never been recognised as a career guidance programme, perhaps because narratives seem so unlike what has come to be expected in a programme, following the line of influential figures from Parsons (1909) to Williamson (1965). Yet it would be difficult to know how else one might conceive of his work. He deliberately planned and executed a programme to uplift disadvantaged youth to positions of worth in work and community. In New York slums after the Civil War, Alger became acquainted with poor and homeless youth with no prospects for the future. Among other efforts, he began writing novels. Each novel was intended to serve as a model, showing how a young person could rise from unfortunate circumstances to move forward towards success in life and career.

Alger's novels were hardly literary gems, but they inspired and guided generations of North Americans. Apparently, it was once common for successful people to attribute their rise to a dog-eared copy of a Horatio Alger novel, still kept in their libraries. Even now, there are Horatio Alger associations that perpetuate his message. So what was it about these novels that had such impact? Among many possibilities, two stand out.

Firstly, the main character always started in impoverished, disadvantaged circumstances, which was the norm for the majority of North Americans at that time. The main character ended in success, which probably captured the aspiration of most people. Thus, he began where they were and ended where they wanted to be. Secondly, the middle of each novel answered the question of how to move onward and upward, from a dismal beginning to a bright future. Alger's answer was character (and, often, assistance from a mentor). With self-reliance, honesty, perseverance and other character virtues, the adolescent hero struggled through hardships, temptations, false accusations and crooked dealings to success. At present, we would entitle character differently as self-efficacy, personal causation, internal locus of control, or other terms that mark a sense of agency.

Few professionals in career development would consider writing a novel or short story, but there are other ways to communicate a story, from anecdote to forms of dramatic production. Probably the most accessible and effective approach can be found in Kieran Egan's (1986) superb book on teaching as storytelling. His model can be readily adapted for different cultural settings and different kinds of normative passages. Whether through storied instruction or another approach, a story displays causality, how one moves from a beginning to an end. The major causal force is the agent who makes things happen.

Some people might need only a model to follow. Others need to have a role shaped to suit them. In a job search, for instance, there are fears, awkwardness, setbacks, embarrassments, following leads in uncertainty, and lots of instances of doing things one might prefer not to do. To succeed, a person must be a causal agent who is strong enough to overcome fears, recover from setbacks, and the like (see Stevens, 1986; Cochran & Laub, 1994). An ideal role is apt to be beyond reach. What a person needs is a personal role that he or she can actually perform or perform with assistance. Such a role might begin with a realistic model, but one that is then shaped in accordance with an individual's attitudes and values, strengths and weaknesses. Kelly's (1955) fixed role therapy is one advantageous way to carry out this personalisation or adaptation of role.

My intent here is not to spell out a programme in detail, but to indicate how a narrative approach might proceed. While this discussion began in a social reality rather than a life history, it ends in a similar way. For both career decision and career projects such as a job search, the aim of a narrative approach is to script a person with a meaningful role in a clearer story line. With a job search, for instance, the immediate aim is to help someone get a job, but the developmental aim is to equip a person for living.

### **1.5 The vitality of a narrative approach**

The vitality of an emerging theory and practice is shown in different ways at different times. Early on, conceptions seem important to show feasibility. Later, research demonstrations are apt to become more important. Whether at an early stage of conception or a later stage of research, vitality derives largely from the promise that an approach seems to offer.

In this chapter, I have tried to show the promise of narrative career counselling in three ways. Firstly, narrative provides an approach to personal meaning that is long overdue in career counselling. Professional literature on such topics as value systems, personal identity or self-concept has not led to significant change in practice. Secondly, the purpose of narrative career counselling is to help a person become a stronger agent in his or her own life story. A loftier goal is difficult to imagine, but developing strategies and techniques suggest that it is a goal that is practical and achievable. In my experience, clients tend to find that working with personal meanings towards a coherent pattern of meaning is an exciting, natural way to proceed. Thirdly, the design of a narrative approach can be extended indefinitely to other problematic aspects of career, offering the possibility of a richer integration of previously separate services.

To these areas of promise, a fourth might be mentioned. The promise of a narrative approach rests partly upon the vitality of scholarly contributions made to it. In this volume, an impressive range of topics is presented. Professional training, for instance, is a critical issue. Story is a human universal, and by taking a multicultural perspective, innovations are likely to arise. Defining narrative practice in diverse settings (such as the workplace) is needed. Drawing from various constructivist theories might enrich practice. All of these varied contributions suggest that the present is a time of building and strengthening foundations to fulfill the promise of the initial conception.

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# Narrative counselling: an emerging theory for facilitating life career success

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## **2.1 Introduction**

Inspired by the social constructivist school of thinking, the emerging narrative theoretical framework has stimulated immense attention in the realm of vocational and career psychology (Chen, 2002a; 2006b; Cochran, 1997; Savickas, 2001). The vitality of the narrative approach lies in its central focus on contextual meaning-making that reflects and facilitates individuals' unique and subjective life career experiences (Chen, 2001b; Young et al., 2002). As a result, human intention and action are integrated into the career construction process in a more holistic and comprehensive manner. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the philosophical foundation, conceptual premises and theoretical tenets that have shaped the narrative inquiry as an effective approach to facilitate success in individuals' lives and careers. In elaborating the narrative theory within the context of life career integration, this chapter proposes some general implications of the narrative theory for career development and counselling interventions, making an effort to link theory and research to practice.

## **2.2 Narrative inquiry in career psychology: a theoretical overview**

Like most human development experiences in life, the quest for knowledge evolves with a gradual process of historical progression. The emergence and evolution of the narrative approach in career development research and practice certainly exemplify such a human experience in the realm of the social sciences. This section begins with a brief overview of the philosophical roots of the narrative theo-

ry in the field of vocational and career psychology. This is followed by a review of more recent theoretical developments in the field, aiming to provide a synthesised and illustrative theoretical profile of the narrative approach.

### **2.2.1 Philosophical roots**

The emergence and development of narrative inquiry as a theoretical framework in vocational and career psychology is a relatively recent phenomenon that concurs with the growing attention given to social constructivism in the field during the past two decades (Chen, 2002a; Cochran, 1985; 1990; 1991; 1997; Collin & Young, 1986; 1992; Savikas, 1993; 1997; 2001; Peavy, 1992; 1996; 1997). Notwithstanding this newness and ongoing evolution, the theoretical roots of the narrative approach can be easily traced back for at least five decades.

#### **2.2.1.1 Impact of Kelly's personal construct theory**

Perhaps the most influential work that stimulated and contributed to the formation of the constructivist school of thinking in contemporary human psychology is George Kelly's (1955) pioneering theory articulating the psychology of personal constructs. A significant shift from the positivistic world-view in search of an objective life reality and common truth, Kelly contended that the study and practice of psychology are about exploring and understanding each individual's subjective world. As this subjective world is unique to each person, only those personal constructs that pertain to the person concerned can ultimately affect what he or she thinks, feels and does. Personal constructs differ from one individual to another, making individuals view the world very differently and generating different individual responses to events and experiences. At the core of Kelly's theory is the recognition of each individual's unique human capacity to construct and develop his or her own theories about the living world and his or her experiences of it. As such personal theories or constructs are implemented in the real world, individuals learn to test, improve and enhance the relevance of their personal constructs.

Constructs are highly complex, dynamic, individualised and situational. Not only are individuals capable of developing new constructs, but they also manifest their personal constructs in ways that pertain to their personal preferences and/or convenience. Essential to the relevance and applicability of personal constructs is not so much the existence of the constructs, but rather, how meaningful and effective such constructs are perceived to be, and how they are eventually utilised by the person who is the core determinant operating and maintaining his or her personal constructs. Individuals make use of their personal constructs as alternative resources to cope with living events and experiences with personal meanings. In this sense, each person is the most knowledgeable expert or scientist regarding his or her own life experience (Savickas, 1997), and subjective meaning-making is of vital importance to this life experience (Chen, 2001a).

Kelly's theory has had a huge, direct impact on the growth of the constructivism movement in vocational and career psychology in the past two decades. In particu-

lar, constructivist career development and counselling theories with a strong focus on the narrative approach have acknowledged the philosophical inspirations and intellectual insights provided by Kelly's comprehensive, visionary thinking frame of personal constructs (Cochran, 1997; Young, Valach & Collin, 1996; 2002; Peavy, 1997; Savickas, 1993; 1997). Kelly's influences and contributions can thus be elaborated in a substantive manner. While all essential tenets and principles from the personal construct theory appear to be extremely valuable to the narrative approach, a few points may be especially worth noting.

Firstly, the narrative inquiry in career development and counselling represents a total respect for an individual's personal constructs in his or her subjective world, and makes every effort to use these constructs as the core for exploration and positive change. Secondly, personal constructs provide not only the rationale but also the actual contents for the formation and development of an individual's life career narratives. Thirdly, personal constructs justify and enable the process of meaning-making in one's narrative inquiry and exploration. Fourthly, as the essential builder of his or her personal constructs, the person has the capacity to be the author and actor in constructing his or her own life career narratives. Fifthly, parallel to the dynamic and changing nature of his or her personal constructs, the person can frame, reframe and develop new versions of his or her life career narratives with a flexible and open mind. This dynamic nature of narratives means that they do not have to be fixed chapters but, rather, open episodes that incorporate ongoing new experiences and insights.

### *2.2.1.2 Influences of Super's life-span, life-space theory*

Within the realm of vocational and career psychology, the influence of Donald Super's (1953; 1957; 1990) life-span, life-space theory is too important to be missed as we look back at the historical evolution of constructivism in general, and the narrative approach in particular. Originally known as the developmental approach in career development and counselling (Super, 1957), many consider Super's theory as the most comprehensive theoretical model in the field, despite the criticism that perhaps the broad scope of the theoretical model has made it look somewhat segmental during its 40-plus years of ongoing addition, revision, expansion and renewal (Brown, 1996; Herr et al., 2004; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005; Sharf, 2006; Zunker, 2006). Through the creation of a series of theoretical constructs, such as the notions of self-concept and self-concept system, the life roles, and life-career-rainbow, Super was the first theorist who highlighted the key function of phenomenology and sociology in the realm of vocational and career psychology (Zunker, 1994). Super suggested that the essence of vocational and career psychology was to allow and empower individuals to participate in the subjective exploration of their self-concept systems and complex life-roles, making meanings of who they were and what they did throughout their entire life span.

Although Super (1953; 1957) did not specifically focus on the narrative approach in his initial comprehensive theoretical model, his strong inclination towards humanistic psychology made his theory invaluable to the constructivism

and constructivist narrative approach. It is apparent that life career narrative becomes meaningless if the construct of the self-concept system is not part of the picture. Similarly, life career narratives will not form until the life roles of child, parent, spouse, student, worker and citizen are acted out in the story line. Super (1957) articulated that these life roles are played out in real life theatres such as family, school, workplace and the community. These life theatres are precisely the major settings where individuals' life career narratives take place. Life career narratives will not exist without the careful consideration of these background scenes that comprise the essential social, cultural, familial, personal, interpersonal and other relevant contexts for the very existence of the episodes, as well as the entirety of a complex life career story. Apparently, Super's insights, albeit broad and general, have made a significant, pioneering contribution to constructivist thinking in general, and narrative theory in particular. This contribution provides not only philosophical support, but also a practical means for making narrative counselling interventions. This is because, as illustrated earlier, many of Super's concepts actually function as the essential components that form the helping strategies in narrative-oriented career development practice and career counselling intervention. Of note, in the most recent revised version of Super's life-span, life-space theory of careers, Super et al. (1996) have suggested that narrative construction should be included in the career exploration process, making a direct connection between Super's theory and the narrative approach.

### ***2.2.2 The evolving theory of narrative career counselling***

It is important to recognise the philosophical contributions of George Kelly and Donald Super to the evolution of the constructivist world-view and the narrative approach in career psychology. Their contributions provide a critical background to comprehending the historical influences and rational foundation upon which the current constructivist and narrative approaches have been inspired to begin and grow. Echoing Kelly's personal construct conceptualisation and Super's humanistic, phenomenological and sociological world-view, current perspectives in constructivist and narrative career counselling present a more direct and integral picture of a theoretical framework that incorporates a wealth of works of theorists, scholars and researchers who have been endeavouring to promote the constructivist approach and enrich the narrative approach in vocational and career psychology. To reflect this reality, the narrative career counselling approach in the present discussion is not seen as a restricted, narrowly focused theory. Instead, the present effort is to combine a range of diverse, yet very similar, theoretical models and perspectives into a broader, more integrated theoretical framework of narrative career counselling that describes and illustrates the essence of social constructivism in the field. Following this rationale, notions such as "perspective(s)", "model(s)", "approach" and "framework" in the current discussion of narrative inquiry all refer to this broadly defined, emerging narrative theory within the domain of vocational and career psychology, unless otherwise specified.

### 2.2.2.1 Contextual career theory of life narratives

As a central part of the constructivist school of thinking, the core of the evolving narrative theory rests on the phenomenological entirety of the total person. In contrast to the traditional objectivist or positivistic world-view on careers, the essence of the narrative theory is the basic constructivist belief that, like other life experiences, careers are representations of individuals' subjective interaction with various contextual influences, including complex social and environmental circumstances (Chen, 2003; Savickas, 2000). Among the influential works that have promoted and facilitated the formation and evolution of the narrative career theory, Richard Young and his colleagues' effort is worth noting (Collin & Young, 1986; 1992; Young & Collin, 1992; Young & Valach, 2000; Young et al., 1996; 2002). The fundamental part of this effort, in my view, is Collin and Young's (1986) work calling for new directions in career theoretical development. In this work, these authors challenged the much more influential and dominant positivist theoretical thinking frame in the field at the time. They observed the inadequacy of the objectivist world views presented by many established theoretical models, that is theories that focused predominantly on measuring individuals' "observable" traits so that a more rational fit could be found between a person and his or her vocational identity.

Collin and Young (1986) contended that a constructivism-oriented new paradigm was needed for the evolution of career theories in the new era of the post-industrial and postmodern Western world. Such new directions were necessary because career theories should reflect and capture the fast-changing reality of a much more dynamic and complex interaction between individuals' experiences of life career development and the contexts in which such experiences took place. In proposing and articulating their constructivist career theoretical directions, Collin and Young (1986) apparently made a noteworthy contribution to forming one of the early key conceptual frameworks in narrative career counselling. These authors postulated that their vision of career constructivism included three major approaches, namely ecological, biographical and hermeneutical, in developing the broad new epistemology in vocational and career psychology.

Although the three approaches attempted to address the career theoretical development from a broad constructivist world-view, they provided not only conceptual guidance but also practical means for building the narrative theory. The narrative inquiry in life career development represents a biographical process. The hermeneutical approach is a prerequisite to the construction and understanding of a person's biographical accounts because narrative meanings only become meaningful when they are interpreted, or undergo the hermeneutical process, as one's life career narratives are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Similarly, ecological inquiry is pivotal to the development of a meaningful life career story line. Life career ecology refers to the interaction between the dynamic and complex relationships that coexist in all the narrative episodes, as well as throughout the entire organisation and development of a human story. A life career narrative becomes meaningless should this ecology remain vague and/or understudied

(Chen, 1999). In short, each and all of the three approaches demonstrate their vital importance to the narrative explanation of people's life career experiences, and none of them can be overlooked in considering the narrative theory.

While the subsequent works of Young and colleagues (e.g. Collin & Young, 1988; Young & Collin, 1988; 1992) continued to enrich and expand the new directions for constructivist theoretical exploration, of particular importance is the more recent contextual career theory developed by Young et al. (1996; 2002). As a natural evolution of their previous works in theory development, Young and colleagues' contextual theory is considered one of the major emerging theoretical models in career psychology (Brown, 2002; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005; Zunker, 2002; 2006). By explaining career from the angle of a contextualist action theory, contextual career theory studies individuals' subjective world in relation to their actions in life career development experiences. In so doing, the theoretical building blocks comprise the constructs of context, narrative and interpretation.

Drawing attention to context appears to have particular relevance for the narrative approach in career counselling. Context in a person's life refers to a broad and inclusive concept that encompasses all situations and variables in one's life career pathway. Narrative meaning-making only occurs within these contexts. Also, contextual meanings derived from one's life career experiences and events are always interweaving, and it is therefore of critical importance to understand the dynamic and interactive relationships in the life career ecological system. Furthermore, the narrative meaning interpretation takes into account a multiplicity of diverse and complex variables and influences in the development of one's story line. As such, a life career narrative aims to construct a more holistic and comprehensive account of the person's experiences.

Following Young et al. (1996; 2002), narrative exploration means an ever-changing, ongoing interaction of various contextual variables. Narratives only become alive because of the meanings they deliver within their particular contexts. The construction of life career narratives recognises the complexity of the interactive, multifaceted correlation between an array of very diverse influencing factors in the context. Of central importance to the framing and reframing of a narrative is an individual's intentionality and actions that manifest socially constructed and directed behaviour. In this sense, actions demonstrate behaviour, actions occur with internal processes, and actions are rooted in and reflect social meaning. Of note, the constructionist principle of conceiving human action as a whole appears to be particularly meaningful to individuals' life career narration, emphasising that not only individual actions, but also joint actions with others, are of critical importance while a person is constructing his or her life career narratives.

### 2.2.2.2 Cochran's narrative career counselling theory

The most recent comprehensive theoretical model regarding the narrative approach in vocational and career psychology is to be found in Larry Cochran's (1997) book, *Career counseling: a narrative approach*.

Cochran's (1997) work has been widely adopted and is regarded as the most comprehensive and influential narrative career counselling theory in current liter-

ature (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005; Sharf, 2006; Zunker, 2002; 2006). This is largely due to the fact that Cochran's work contributes to both theory development and practical applications. As such, it provides an extensive, solid conceptual framework for career researchers and scholars in understanding and studying the narrative theory – an emerging constructivist theory that facilitates individuals' desire for and effort towards life career success. Equally important is that Cochran's work also offers a very articulate elaboration of helping methods and strategies that can actually make narrative counselling a viable and effective intervention approach in career development and counselling practice. As Savickas (see Cochran, 1997:vii) states:

In explaining his model, methods, and materials, Cochran provides one of the first books on career counseling ... In this book, Cochran is the first to elaborate in such fine detail a career counseling theory – one that invites counselors to make career interventions more personal. After reading this book, I remain ready to help my clients match their vocational identities to fitting occupations, yet I am now better prepared to also help them employ their identities into the greatest story they will ever tell – their own lives.

Savickas's commentary is of vital importance in capturing the essence of the emerging narrative approach in general, and Cochran's narrative career counselling theory in particular, that is, the principle of wholeness and entirety that underlies the foundation of this constructivist career theoretical framework. The narrative approach encourages and facilitates "the greatest story" of persons' own lives to be told with in-depth intention and meanings. Of note, Cochran's (1997) theory is a natural extension of his earlier research and investigations (e.g. Cochran, 1985; 1986; 1990; 1991; Cochran & Laub, 1994) that studied the narrative approach in explaining and understanding individuals' life career development experiences. In this sense, Cochran's (1997) career narrative approach is an empirically based theoretical framework that demonstrates strong research evidence.

Central to Cochran's (1991; 1997) narrative approach is an emphasis on holistic meaning-making in an integral picture of a person's life career narration. This narration occurs and evolves in a complex life career contextual system, or the "storied ecology" as defined by Cochran (1997: 133). Rather than putting a person and his or her experiences and personal constructs into certain categories for analysis, the making of the narration invites and encourages the interplay of the constructs and contextual experiences and their integration into the holistic construction. This organisation and development of the narration encompasses and reflects a combination of human qualities – cognitive, emotive and behavioural alike. While rhetoric and rhythm from plots and episodes convey meanings, they only become meaningful when they are integrated into the entirety of a person's life career narration. This wholeness of meaning-making points to the very essence of the narrative approach, that is, let people have the liberty of telling about their own lives in a contextual manner that makes sense to the holistic construction of such life experiences.

Cochran (1997) suggests several key aspects for meaning-making via narrative inquiry and exploration. Firstly, a narrative follows a temporal organisation that combines the beginning, the middle and the end into a whole. Secondly, the narrative demonstrates a synthetic structure that combines an expansion of elements and spheres of elements into a whole. Thirdly, each plot and episode conveys a point to the formation of the storyline, indicating that the point is a meaning unit rather than a meaningless expression. Combined, these essential characteristics form the discourse that makes the life career narration a meaningful, holistic exploration for a person. Of central importance is to enhance a strong sense of human agency in the narration, that is, the narrator or the author of the narrative is empowered to be the agent who strives to combine human intention and actions to make things happen (Chen, 2006a; Cochran, 1991; 1997). As such, narrative discourse is to be translated into optimal life dramas for positive change and constructive alternatives, which will lead the person to life career success. In applying his narrative theory to career counselling intervention, Cochran (1997) illustrates a series of practical strategies. Some of the main intervention methods include helping a client elaborate a career problem, compose a life history, find a future narrative and actualise the narrative.

Actualising the narrative is the climax of Cochran's theory in career intervention, since elements and episodes in past narratives only become relevant and meaningful if they are utilised to generate insights for present and future life career narratives. Working towards a constructive future narrative is the ultimate goal of life career success. "Stories of self and career can be used by counselor and client to consolidate present self-knowledge and to help guide forward movement to anticipated futures" (Peavy, 1992: 219). It is these "anticipated futures" that pinpoint the significance of actualising the narrative, or the execution of a sense of vocation (Cochran, 1990) for an optimal life career destination. This actualising process, according to Cochran (1997), requires that the counsellor helps the client learn to construct reality, change a life structure and enact a role through the cyclic process that underlines the very nature of a complex life narration. In so doing, the client becomes more capable of crystallising life career decisions that are being formed to facilitate a more optimal ending, or outcome, of the narration. The more optimal this ending, the more successful the client will be in his or her present and future life career development experiences.

### 2.2.2.3 *Synthesis of narrative inquiry in motion*

As an essential constructivist epistemology and methodology in the career development realm, the narrative approach has shown its vitality and viability. The emergence and evolution of the narrative career theoretical framework reflects the efforts of researchers, scholars and practitioners to expand the scope and enrich the studies of life career development. This trend in theoretical advancement over the last two decades has presented a paradigm shift and conceptual transformation in vocational and career psychology (Savickas, 2000). In an effort to build a comprehensive theory of career, Savickas (2001) postulates that life narratives are one

of the elementary constructs worthy of special attention. Together with other key factors such as dispositions and concerns, narratives play a central role in the making of an integral and coherent constructivist conceptualisation of career development.

Pertaining to the more comprehensive theoretical composition is the subjective career to be explored, understood and explained through the narrative discourse that reflects human intentions and actions. Personal dispositions and concerns can hardly shape a life career identity without the subjective meanings a person derives from and contributes to the ever-evolving narration. According to Savickas (2001: 315):

Individuals who self-consciously reflect on their objective career can construct a subjective career in the form of a narrative. A career narrative comprehends the vocational self and shapes the further elaboration of this self-conception in the work world. Narratives about subjective career foster self-knowledge and clarify personal goals. A sense of subjective career heightens self-understanding and self-definition. More importantly, subjective career guides adaptation as it negotiates opportunities and constraints, and uses the self-organised personality dispositions to address self-regulatory concerns.

It is this subjective career that highlights the essence of narratives in theory development, because narrative meaning-making appears to provide promises in promoting individuals' career and vocational wellbeing in many respects. The narrative inquiry emphasises and validates the critical integration of human intention and actions for life career success (Chen, 2002b; 2006b; Cochran & Laub, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988; 1990; 1992; Young & Valach, 1996; 2000; Young et al., 1996; 2002). As such, the narrative approach functions as a central component in the general practice of constructivist career counselling (Peavy, 1992; 1993; 1996; 1997; Neimeyer, 1989; 1992; 1995; Savickas, 1993; 1997; 2001). In this context, narrative inquiry offers a means of realising constructivism in the field, illustrating the applicability of the constructivist world-view to the understanding and enhancement of holistic meaning-making in people's life career construction (Savickas, 2002).

Coherent with and reflective of its constructivist orientation, the narrative career counselling theory remains a flexible framework showing great potential for theoretical integration. Savickas (2000) suggests the possibility of making traditional objectivist career theories receptive to the constructivist paradigm. This rationale leads to the further exploration of utilising the narrative methodology as a representative constructivist approach while working towards the theoretical integration of the objectivist/positivistic school of thinking and the constructivist school of thinking in careers. Chen (2003) demonstrates that such possibilities seem optimistic, as the integration could occur to benefit the enrichment and expansion of both career theory and career counselling practice. It is suggested and illustrated that the narrative approach can integrate with other theoretical models within the domain of constructivism. Moreover, the narrative approach can also work together with other approaches rooted in the more traditional and estab-

lished objectivist or positivistic theoretical foundation (Chen, 2003). Through these possibilities of integration, the narrative career theory is an open stance to ongoing development in the holistic construction. From this perspective, the narrative inquiry of meaning-making in careers is part of the total life career narration.

A synthesised overview of the emergence and evolution of the narrative career development and counselling theory has engendered much insight and richness surrounding this constructivist theoretical framework in vocational and career psychology. In a more recent effort to elaborate the role and function of the narrative approach that contributes to and enhances the knowledge advancement in theory, research and practice, Chen (2002a) notes three essential characteristics of the narrative approach pertaining to the framework's great potential for facilitating individuals' life career success. These aspects seem to comprehend the key theoretical principles and tenets, and hence are heuristic and helpful in sketching the evolving narrative theory.

Firstly, recognition of and respect for a person's subjectivity remain the core of narrative meaning-making and, as such, the subjective life career is the key to problem solving as well as to personal growth and success. Secondly, experiences should be integrated into the narration process in an enriching manner. That is, this integration aims to generate a constructive combination of reflections, articulation, projection and actions. Thirdly, the holistic narrative construction becomes meaningful when the contexts in which the narrative is developed and constructed are clearly defined and understood, indicating the coherence between the holistic narrative construction and its related contexts. Of critical importance is that these three key qualities coexist and are intertwined, contributing to the dynamic and complex integration of intentionality and meaning-making, context and ecology, and human agency and actions in the wholeness of a person's life career narration.

### **2.3 Cultivation and application of life career narrative: from theory to practice**

Theory only shows its relevance when it makes practical sense in relation to true life phenomena. The propriety of the narrative theory, therefore, lies in its applicability to explaining a more holistic human experience for positive change and growth through the process of professional helping and self-helping (Cochran, 1997; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). This personal growth, albeit very often accompanied by treacherousness, difficulties, uncertainty, dereliction, failure and pain, furnishes the necessary resources for one's success in life and career. There is hardly a commonly agreed standard to define and measure the perception of success. The meaningfulness of letting an individual grow through his or her own narration is to facilitate the person to utilise and expand personal potential for more growing resources which, in turn, leads to more successful experiences in life and career. In this sense, a sign of positive change or a sense of growing, no matter how minute and trivial it might seem, depicts a kind of success that is meaningful to the person.

To promote and empower this success in an individual's unique life career development context, the narrative theoretical framework can and should be applicable to the person's holistic construction of narrative for life career enhancement. One of the biggest advantages of this holistic construction is the total integration of life and career as a single whole (Bloch & Richmond, 1998; Chen, 2001a; Hansen, 1997; Miller-Tiedemann, 1997; 1999; Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990; Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1991). As careers and vocational pursuits are always intertwined with other aspects of personal and social life experiences, the wholeness of life and career remains intact and enriched through the holistic construction of life career narration (Chen, 2006b; Cochran, 1990). Cultivation and application of narratives in this context refer to the effort of applying the narrative theory to life career development practice in an integrated and holistic manner. Several implications may be outlined to connect theory to practice. While these implications for practice are elaborated in a career counselling context, they may pertain to applications in other life career development contexts, including self-helping situations. By the same token, such implications also contribute to the enrichment of theory and research in life career narration studies.

### **2.3.1 Narrative context and ecology**

Experiences of life and career only function in their unique contexts where the dynamic and complex human ecology exists and evolves. Career counselling needs to draw particular attention to the context and ecology in which narratives can be composed. Ecology refers to the totality of interrelationships involved in a life career context (Chen, 1999), presenting a complex interaction between various personal and environmental variables, factors and situations in the narration. Thus, helping a client understand this ecology is a must because of its influence on the formation and development of plots and episodes in his or her life career narration. Conceiving ecology in different ways can affect the shaping of the context that comprises the foundation for the narration.

Career counselling should endeavour to help the client clarify a variety of relational variables that interplay in the story context. In so doing, the counsellor can provide guidance and facilitation, through which the client may become more aware of aspects that are ignored or not explicit in the total context. He or she also becomes more aware of the linkage and interconnection between these ecological aspects. Based on such increased awareness and understanding, the client gains a clearer assessment of the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the interrelationships in the ecology, as well as their impact on the composition and direction of the narration. The counsellor can play a constructive role, during which he or she remains contextual in providing assistance that fits the specific learning needs of each individual client. Some clients may feel better facilitated if they are given more time and space for self-exploration. Other clients may need more affirmation and encouragement. Still others may require substantive and detailed guidance to elucidate the ecological variables in the current context of narration.

Through this contextual and situational helping process, the client comes to the realisation that composing life career narratives means organising these complicated, sometimes challenging, interrelationships into a coherent flow, serving to generate hope, create possibility and achieve success. The contextual ecology is not alone in yielding significance, but it becomes pivotal when its impact and influences are felt in the composition of the “storied ecology”, as described by Cochran (1997), in one’s holistic construction of meaning-making. The client sees the reality of a contextual truth, that is, contextual and ecological variables manifest their critical functioning within the contextual richness of a life career narration: the narration that facilitates positive growth and success.

### ***2.3.2 Storied intentionality and meaning-making***

To make full use of human intention and its associated effort of meaning-making pinpoints the essence of narrative life career exploration. Life stories represent human intention in accounts that make sense to human experiences in various life contexts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979; Freeman, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mead, 1975; Sarbin, 1986; 1992). As part of such lived accounts, narratives of life career development experiences unfold with a sense of the meaning the authors of, or actors in, these stories intend to articulate and deliver (Amundson, 1998; Chen, 2006b; Cochran, 1990; Gardner et al., 2001). The narrative discourse itself is a way to communicate and a vehicle for delivery. It is the intention of forming the story and the meanings conveyed by the storyline that really matter to those who are involved in the making of the story, as well as those who are observing the development of the story.

In reflecting this essential role and function of the narrative inquiry, narrative career counselling focuses on helping clients explore and fulfil a genuine and integrated self in their subjective career (Super, 1957; 1990). Whether it is a recollection of what happened in the past or an anticipation of what will happen in the future, intentionality and meanings surrounding the narrative accounts become the core for the helping intervention. Guided by this expectation, the main function of narrative counselling is to facilitate clients’ level of intentionality and their capacity to make meaning. In so doing, the counsellor can help the client become more intentional in the process of narration. As he or she engages in the plots and episodes, the client may have a hard time to see through the intention and meanings in a more thorough manner. Thus, he or she may need to be invited, encouraged or even challenged to go above and beyond the surface scenes of the narration, probing and clarifying the deeper thoughts and emotions that anchor the contents themselves, such as events and experiences, in the structure and organisation of the narration.

Keeping in mind the contextual and ecological influences, the client is facilitated to adopt an open mind towards his or her intentionality. Storied intention refers to both a reflective and reflexive construction. Reflectivity here conveys the sense of the subjective nature in which the narrator and actor can make dynamic and diverse meaning interpretations based on his or her phenomenological views, whereas reflexivity represents the interactive and multifaceted communication

between the subjective intention and the feedback from the various reality checks. The client thus comes to realise that storied meaning-making provides flexibility for change and expansion. In other words, intentionality to form a life career narrative and meaning-making through the narration are not static states but open processes for rethinking, recounting and reframing. As intention and meaning-making are open for transformation and reconstruction, life career narratives can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, leading to more options and possibilities for life career success (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Schneider, 2001).

Apparently, expectations of success focus on composing more desirable and ideal future narratives, positing a forward-looking tendency in the holistic construction of narration. Notwithstanding its inclusion of past and present plots and episodes, a life career narrative always draws attention to the future direction. Thus, constructing intentionality and making meanings during the narration present a future orientation in narrative career counselling. The counsellor helps the client recognise the relevant meanings embedded in past and present narratives. More importantly, the relevance and importance of these meanings are described and interpreted in the light of their influences in composing a more constructive and meaningful future narrative. As Cochran (1997: 1) suggests:

The basic subject of career counseling is a person's future. The present is not neglected, but it becomes important precisely because it is fraught with implications for the future. Although career counseling might involve a variety of immediate adjustments, the most fundamental outcome is a person's design for his or her future career, a projection of a course of life in working to produce ends.

To implement this design, the client is facilitated to be more purposeful and intentional in clarifying his or her future narration. Based on that, the client incorporates his or her well-defined intention into the projection for optimal future narratives in life and career.

### ***2.3.3 Human agency and actions in narration***

The ultimate goal of a narrative exploration is to construct and actualise optimal narratives in real-life situations, personal, social and vocational alike. Career counselling attempts to accomplish this goal with tangible results in clients' life career success. Facilitating intentional actions underscores the purpose of adopting the narrative counselling approach in the first place. Throughout the entire helping process, the coexistence of intentionality and actions is always brought to the client's attention. To reinforce this attention remains a main task for composing the narrative with a temporal movement, leading to the projection of a more optimal future. This means that not only does the client become more aware of the significance of human actions in the narration, but he or she is also always encouraged and empowered to be an actor who operationalises what has been planned and designed for the future (Touraine, 1988). Becoming an intentional actor allows the client to understand his or her current career problem better, to exercise personal agency in coping with the problem and to implement more construc-

tive solutions (Cochran, 1994).

In this sense, narrative construction requires actions. The meaningfulness of constructing future narratives lies with the narrator's and/or actor's actual purposeful effort to make things happen, in the same way that persons enact their narratives in life and career (Chen, 1997b; 1999; Cochran, 1997). Rooted in Bandura's (1986; 2001a; 2001b) social cognitive theory on holistic human functioning, career human agency refers to combining intentionality and actions to make things happen (Chen, 2006a; Cochran, 1990; 1997). Narrative career counselling intervention provides the ideal context for founding, nurturing and enhancing the client's personal agency. To reinforce the notion of action, the counsellor can help the client increase awareness, strengthen psychological stamina, learn skills, make projections and, more importantly, enact real-life dramas. The client comes to the realisation that an ideal narration without actions loses its vigour and rationale to continue. A person needs to act on his or her narrative projection to turn intention into reality. This reality may not be without errors and defects, but it generates meanings to the person for growth and insights for a more desirable ending in future narratives.

In working towards the completion of a narrative,

a person is not a passive target or object that is waiting to be selected or rejected/phased-out by the environment. On the contrary, the person actively takes the ownership of his or her vocational destiny by repeatedly designing and launching self into the ongoing career making process (Chen, 1997a: 7).

It is this sense of "career making" that depicts the centrality in life career narration of action that aims to facilitate and empower the person to become the agent in his or her quest for success. In fact, narrative exploration in career counselling can be used as a vehicle to promote the client's sense of life career agency.

The client comes to realise that his or her effort here-and-now exemplifies an attempt to combine intention and actions in agentic functioning. The experience of active engagement (Amundson, 1998) during the career counselling process can reinforce the sense of human agency. Furthermore, the same functioning is to be practised when the person enacts his or her projections for success in real-life career theatres (Super, 1957). Thus, career human agency is not an abstract concept, but a way of being that makes common sense to lay people in everyday life. Instead of being trapped in the role of victim and patient, the person realises his or her potential to become an actor and agent who makes more positive, constructive and successful narratives happen in the life career reality (Cochran, 1997). Being an agent requires one to persevere in the real-life career dramas with a sense of hope, a strength of spirit, a meaningful direction, an open mind and a wealth of skills. Within the context of a well-defined and clarified sense of intentionality and meaning, perseverance necessitates both the willpower and the coping strategies in the enactment. Consequently, the person becomes a more skilful agent for building success in life career development (Chen, 1997a).

An agent seldom acts alone, meaning that the person can rarely take action without the direct and indirect influences from the storied ecology in which his or

her life career narratives are composed and developed. The person's agentic functioning in the narration is often affected by the involvement of other people, especially significant others such as family members, friends, mentors and peers, in the holistic construction of a life career narrative. For example, a narration about a career change may have to take into consideration the views and feelings of family members. The same scenario may also need to involve opinions from one's close friends and mentors. Thus, the notion of joint action becomes a construct that is too important to be missed in the narrative process of building intention and contextual meaning making (Young et al., 2002).

To facilitate a sense of joint action, the counselling encounter itself demonstrates an effort of joint action, during which the counsellor and client work together to make a future career projection. More importantly, the client also comes to observe and comprehend that his or her actions very often have to be actualised in a context of joint action. Using the example of career change mentioned earlier, family members and significant others can be co-authors in composing the plots and co-actors in actualising the narrative. The effect of this joint action can either facilitate or hinder the temporal structure or even the significant development of the entire storyline. As a result, negotiation may be needed to work towards better harmony, cohesiveness and congruence when a narrative is being composed and projected. A person's agency in life career enactment, therefore, is a manifestation of a complex integration of actions and joint actions in the storied ecology.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

As an emerging and evolving theoretical framework, the narrative approach has made a vibrant impact in understanding and explaining individuals' life career development. The narrative career counselling theory seems to hold great promise for vocational and career psychology in our postmodern, post-industrial world of work (Peavy, 1993; Savickas, 2000). This is because the flow of narration helps capture the human intention and actions that are essential to accomplishing and enhancing life career success. Within the integrated and storied life career ecology, the narrative approach can facilitate and empower individuals to become agents who stretch their personal potential in a holistic construction for meaning-making and optimal growth. It is this wholeness of the narration that makes persons' subjective life career experiences resourceful and alive, leading to more ideal and desirable future projections.

In linking theoretical perspectives and research evidence to the helping interventions, this chapter has elaborated implications that may empower academics and practitioners in the career field. Scholars and researchers may gain insight from considering the narrative career theory a pertinent alternative for research inquiry and theory development. Similarly, career practitioners and their clients may benefit from the utilisation of the narrative approach for the enhancement of life career development practice, including career counselling and self-helping practice. Despite its relative modernity and recent evolution in the field, the narra-

tive inquiry as a constructivist way of thinking has enriched the realm of vocational and career psychology that is broadly defined to include various life career issues throughout individuals' entire life span. To this end, the narrative theory is still in its early stage of evolution. The continuing development of this theory will have much to offer our effort and quest for knowledge and understanding of personal constructs and their related contextual and ecological influences in people's subjective life career pursuits.

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