Hope-Narratives as a Chaos Theory of Career Intervention for Failure

Peter McIlveen
University of Southern Queensland

AUTHOR NOTE

Peter McIlveen, School of Linguistics, Adult & Specialist Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Peter McIlveen, School of Linguistics, Adult & Specialist Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, 4350, Australia. +61 7 46312375. Email: peter.mcilveen@usq.edu.au

Abstract

This paper is an explication of the conceptual underpinnings of a new, narrative career counselling method: fluttering-hope. The method presents a new approach to addressing repetition compulsion, a condition characterised by repeated career-destructive behaviour and experiences of failure. Fluttering-hope is formulated on the basis of the Chaos Theory of Career (CTC), a theory that explicitly acknowledges failure as a natural event in careers. A transtheoretical argument links failure, optimism, hope, psychodynamics, and CTC concepts of attractor and shift. Repetition compulsion is posited as a pendulum attractor and fluttering-hope is posited as a source of perturbation that may induce shift. The method takes a gentle approach to repetition compulsion, and regards it as a psychological mechanism to be treated with great care in career counselling. The paper includes recommendations for future research into the CTC, fluttering-hope, and mathematical modelling.

Keywords: chaos theory of career, repetition compulsion, fluttering-hope, My Career Chapter, narrative career counselling, psychodynamic

Hope-Narratives as a Chaos Theory of Career Intervention for Repetition Compulsion

Given the proliferation of scientific and popular literature on the instability of the post-industrial world-of-work, it is, by now, axiomatic that career decision-making is far from rational and that the world-of-work is in a constant state of flux. It is little wonder that the chaos theory of careers (CTC; Pryor & Bright, 2003; Pryor & Bright, 2011) has emerged in this post-industrial, post-modern zeitgeist. Just as Freud's invention of psychoanalysis manifested hydraulic metaphors that made sense in an industrialised world of steam engines and mechanics, the CTC arises in a world of veritable complexity. It posits new metaphors, drawn from the mathematics of dynamical systems, to foster alternative understandings of the world-of-work and new approaches to career development practices.

In this paper, I address two truths of career development that are captured more clearly and coherently in the CTC than other approaches in the canon of career development: that is, the sober reckoning that one cannot necessarily become whatever or whomever one imagines, and that life is imbued with uncertainty and failure, and all for the good (Pryor & Bright, 2012). However, I hasten to add, the CTC is no pessimistic rendering of existence. Indeed, it is quite the opposite; CTC can be used to operationalise Bandura's (2001) notion of *agentic management of fortuity* via CTC's conceptual embrace of chance and the construct of *luck-readiness* (Neault, 1996). As a consequence, the CTC opens a conceptual and practical causeway for optimism and hope to be the foundation of new transformative methods for use in career counselling; which is the principle objective of this paper.

Career counselling can be a vehicle for optimism and hope in a person's life (Savickas, 1990) and there is an emerging body of career counselling literature that specifically addressing hope (e.g., Niles, 2011). Much of this good work is directed at particular populations, for example: disadvantaged youth (Park-Taylor & Vargas, 2012; Robitschek, 1996), high school students (Creed, Patton, & Bartrum, 2002; Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010), and college students (Jackson & Neville, 1998; Sung, Turner, & Kaewchinda, 2013).

Hope in the Face of Stress and Challenge

The reciprocal link between poor mental health and unemployment (Olesen, Butterworth, Leach, Kelaher, & Pirkis, 2013) means that factors that contribute to poor mental health have a significant impact upon a person's career: either keeping a job or getting a job. There are many and varied conceptualisations of *stress* (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). A key feature of stress is that it entails the thwarting of personal goals: those goals in here-and-now, those in the distant future, and those that go to one's sense of career identity. The stressors that impinge upon a person may be construed as instantaneous destruction, or insidious progressive corrosion. In the social cognitive paradigm (Bandura, 1986, 2001), what matters most is how stressors are emotively construed in the nexus of cognition, behaviour, and environment.

Like "stress", the word "challenge" is loosely bandied around in all manner of contexts, including the discourse of casual conversation, sport, through to workplaces (e.g., "I need a new challenge", "I want to be challenged"). Unfortunately, as a coined expression, the word challenge may suffer the same lack of specificity as stress when thinking about it in regard to career development. For the sake of clarity, the psychological literature takes the following view.

> Challenge is a situation in which the person's efforts are strongly engaged, thus taxing abilities, but in which the person sees opportunity for gain. Challenge might be thought of as an "optimal" obstacle—one that appears surmountable (with effort) and the removal of which will lead to a better state of affairs. (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010, p. 684)

Carver and Connor-Smith differentiate challenge and stress by describing stress in terms of the pursuit of goals and avoidance of punishing threats, and, respectively, the thwarting of goals or the realisation of the threat. Moreover, the notion of challenge implies some expectation of success, that, despite the extraordinary efforts required to meet the challenge, one will, in the end, overcome the challenge—this is self-efficacy writ large. Notwithstanding a person's sense of self-efficacy in the face of a challenge, there is no guarantee of success, just an affirmative belief that "I can do this!" Obviously, one must somehow cope, but how? At this juncture, I turn to the scoping the psychological foundations for the development of a career counselling intervention directed at failure: namely, optimism and hope.

Optimism and Hope

Optimism and hope share a focus on the future and goals; however, they are different constructs and can be treated separately (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006). Optimism can be understood in terms of a generalised cognitive expectancy of a positive future and positive events happening (Carver & Scheier, 2005), or as an explanatory style that attributes successes to oneself and failures to external causes (Peterson, 1991; Peterson & Steen, 2005; Seligman, 2011). Hope is conceptualised as "…a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)'' (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 571). Alarcon et al. elegantly state:

> Simply put, the optimistic person believes that somehow—either through luck, the actions of others, or one's own actions—that his or her future will be successful and fulfilling. The hopeful person, on the other hand, believes specifically in his or her own capability for securing a successful and fulfilling future. (p. 822) …. Whereas optimism is thought to be most relevant within situations that allow for little personal control, hope is thought to be most relevant within situations that allow for high levels of personal control. (p. 824)

This is not to say that an individual cannot be optimistic and hopeful, simultaneously.

Optimism predicts whether engagement-coping is utilised, or disengagement-coping is not utilised (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Carver & Scheier, 2005). Given optimism's role in facilitating active approaches to dealing with threat, or, alternatively, not using withdrawal as a means of coping, it is unsurprising to find the preponderance of evidence that optimism plays a positive role in protecting and enhancing health and well-being (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Smith & MacKenzie, 2006; Taylor & Stanton, 2007); although, the mechanics of its effects (e.g., direct/indirect, moderation, meditation) are yet to be clearly discerned among myriad other variables. Putting the conceptual differences aside, it is sufficient for the current purposes to assert that a meta-analyses (Alarcon et al., 2013; Reichard, Avey, Lopez, & Dollwet, 2013) confirm the positive effects of optimism and hope on workplace performance and individuals' well-being.

At this point in the review of the psychological concepts of optimism and hope it is possible to begin the formulation of a cognitive-behavioural intervention for the development of optimism and hope.

Rehabilitating the Repetition Compulsion

Despite the putative benefits of failure described by Pryor and Bright (2012), most individuals choose to avoid failing and, instead, choose to succeed in their endeavours. As such, failure is something to be prevented, its damage minimised, and the experience of it used for growth. However, there are individuals whose cognitive schemata are so dysfunctional that failure is inherent in a pathological cycle of their being (cf. Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). For example, in psychotherapy one can observe the clinical obverse of optimism, namely pessimism, within the cognitive schemata of individuals suffering in depression. A depressed individual may opine, "I'm no good, everything in my life is no good, and it's always going to be this way"; thus, the individual speaks aloud what is the depressive cognitive triad of an entirely pessimistic rendering of self—world—future (cf. Seligman, 2011). It is within the psychological dynamics of this existential misery that I see the potential for a further contribution of CTC to career counselling. Thus, it is my contention that Pryor and Bright (2012) do not go far enough to explicate the complexity of failure in terms of the CTC.

The notion, *repetition compulsion* (Freud, 1920/1990) is one of the notable inventions of psychoanalysis (Corradi, 2009; Kitron, 2003). There are various conceptual formulations of the repetition compulsion, particularly in terms of its dynamic causes and uses in therapy. It is generically formulated as an individual repeating behaviours—under the power of a compulsion—in relation to an early, traumatic event(s), in an attempt to psychologically defend against the emotions of the event and, with hope, overcome the event. Career counsellors may very well witness the repetition compulsion at work in adult clients who continue to fail in their career because of they make the same mistake in career-related domains in life (e.g., education, work). This may manifest as problems such as career-indecision or self-handicapping behaviours. Exploration in counselling may reveal that the client experienced a trauma as a youngster; for example, the client may have experienced severe shame and embarrassment in the presence of significant others due to an inability to complete a mathematics task at school and having to endure the teacher's exasperation and rage. This event may have been subsequently accompanied by teasing and torment from peers. Much later in life the client might continue to self-handicap her career by continuing to engage in behaviour that attracts the ire or pity of her colleagues, unconsciously attempting to resolve her feelings about the earlier trauma by reliving the event in the present. Thus, by repeating what is pragmatically dysfunctional, the client continues to fail. From this psychodynamic perspective, repetition compulsion sheds an entirely different light on the complex phenomenon, failure.

Despite the convincing argument that career decision-making is not necessarily rational and that it expresses non-conscious processes (cf. Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009), the psychodynamic approach has no substantive presence in current career development literature, despite the availability of useful models (e.g., Bordin, 1990), particularly those in the Adlerian tradition (Watkins, 1993; Watkins & Savickas, 1990). Adler (1932) wrote, "no experience is the cause of success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock—the so-called trauma—but we make out of them just what suits our purposes" (p. 14). Accordingly, Savickas's (2013) career construction theory uses Adler's thesis to link trauma in early life to career choices as meaning-making, through the notion that individuals strive to overcome a sense of *inferiority*. Cardoso (2012) integrates the notion of maladaptive repetition into career construction theory by using social constructionism as an epistemological platform.

From a completely different epistemological platform, CTC draws upon complexity theory to formulate understandings of career in terms of mathematical notions such as attractors: "the constraints on the functioning of a system. …. They influence behavior by drawing it in particular directions or constraining the behavior in some way" (Bright & Pryor, 2005, p. 299). Thus, I formulate repetition compulsion as a *pendulum attractor*. Imagine a pendulum suspended over magnets. The position of the magnets set up a system that produces a dynamic of pulling the pendulum back and forward to and fro; the pendulum swings away and returns a point of origin, only to be pulled away again, and so on, looping back and forth. Although this elegant motion appears to be simple in form, the complex mathematical equation it expresses is quite the opposite. It is suffice for the current purpose to state that the repetitive motion of a pendulum suspended over magnets can be represented mathematically.

The pendulum attractor is an ideal metaphor for reaction formation because, metaphorically, it alludes to a predictable pattern of behaviour. Once psychologically set in motion, the self-same replication-dynamic of a reaction to an experience at one point in time may unconsciously continue to self-propagate over a lifetime. Thus, the psychological seeds of failure are sown in early life; they grow, bloom, self-fertilise, and self-sow again, and repeat their cycle over again.

By calling on the genius of Freud (1920/1990), and by drawing on the CTC to present a new understanding of repetition compulsion, I now turn to the description of a new counselling technique I refer to as *hope-fluttering*.

Toward an Intervention: Fluttering Hope

A framework. Given the metaphor of pendulum attractor, as a self-replicating form, the repetition compulsion has within itself the very focus of this paper: hope. Kitron states:

> It is the repetition that contains the positive potential of giving hope a chance. In face of the dread of unbearable disillusionment, without any repetition there is no chance for a new beginning at all. It is only via the repetition compulsion that risk-taking may begin to take place: first, in a self-defeating manner; then in the paradoxical sense of small risks being taken in order to avoid bigger, more dangerous ones; and at the end 'full-blown' risks are taken, leading to novel experiences. Thus, rather than operating solely in the service of a passive change-resisting forces, the compulsion to repeat, albeit in a frustrating, slow-moving, gradual process, opens the door for change, that is, for potential growth and development. So, as a final formulation, I suggest that the repetition compulsion plays an important part in the self 's quest for restoration. (Kitron, 2003, p. 439)

The CTC construct of strange attractor is decidedly relevant. It also presents new opportunities to use a client's repetition compulsion as a resource, as energy toward change that is carefully considered. The self-defeating client who cannot—or at least refuses—to change because of the anxiety that may result from perturbing the complex system that has been stable for many years, may be more open to having counter-productive thoughts and behaviours challenged, by the counsellor, if such gentle approach were to be taken. Remember: despite its pathology, a reaction formation can be a client's best, unconscious attempt to resolve something deeply painful. Therefore, it should not be dismantled in haste, leaving the client vulnerable and defenceless.

Be mindful that the repetition compulsion is ordinarily operating without the client's subjective awareness. The client may continue to engage in the same

behaviours time and time again, that cascade into eventual failure (again!), leaving the client feeling negatively and asking, "Why does this keep happening to me?" From a counsellor's perspective, a tell-tale sign is whether the client's emotion is presented, (a) outwardly, usually as anger toward others in a blaming manner, or (b) inwardly, perhaps as anger, but also as other emotions representative of dysfunctional unconscious thinking. In either case, the pain that comes with failure keeps company with hopelessness and the fear that there is nothing positive in the future, "so why bother?"

Interpretation phase. Carefully surfacing, or bringing into awareness, the client's repetition compulsion is a matter of interpreting the themes the emerge through the use of My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2011, in press; McIlveen & du Preez, 2012), including the ongoing interviews that precede its application and follow—time in counselling is needed for preparation and for working through the issues. Having discerned the dynamics of the repetition compulsion, take care to engage in a process of as to its value to the person (cf. appreciative enquiry); after all, it has been part of a person's life for many years and there will need to be a period, a space for developing insight and adjustment to new ways of being in the world-of-work and in relationships with others.

Assist the client to understand the dynamic of a repetition compulsion, in the frame of CTC, by using pictures of the pendulum attractor. Further, show the client a model of the attractor by use of a pendulum suspended over two magnets. Instructions for set-up are readily found on educational websites. Allow the client initiate the swing of the pendulum; explain, in terms of complexity and CTC, how a pattern of behaviour eventually settles down into a rhythm and takes on its own life.

At this early stage of insight-development, do not hurry the client and do not rush to engage in cognitive-behavioural techniques to change beliefs. This may take a few sessions in which other counselling methods are used to support the client during this challenging phase. I use the word "challenging" quite deliberately, because it is incumbent upon the counsellor to re-assure the client that he/she can solve the problem and not be overwhelmed in the process.

Generating hope. Here, I use optimism and hope interchangeably, with one (i.e., hope) being a subset form of the other (i.e., optimism). Despite their theoretical differences, my *epistemology of practice* (cf. Polkinghorne, 1992) tells me that the client will experience both simultaneously. Therefore, transtheoretically, not eclectically, I meld theories and practices together so that I am sufficiently informed, pragmatically capable, and confident, enough able to do what is best for the client.

Career counselling is a learning intervention (Krumboltz, 2009) and there is a plethora of literature on the development of learned optimism (Seligman, 2011) and hope (Snyder, 2000) via counselling and educational interventions. Moreover, optimism is amenable to simple and very specific interventions, such as routine writing tasks (Peters, Flink, Boersma, & Linton, 2010), and simplicity is the crux of fluttering hope. Unlike direct, confrontative approaches to amending dysfunctional beliefs that comprise a client's repetition compulsion (cf. Young et al., 2003), fluttering hope is indirect and relies upon a subtle effect that is drawn from the idea of *shift* in the CTC (Bright & Pryor, 2008). Indeed, the word "fluttering", in fluttering-hope, is chosen deliberately to represent the gentle beating of a butterfly's wings as an allusion to the so-called *butterfly effect* in chaos theory—that the initial conditions of an event might ultimately have an effect upon a much larger system. Of course, despite the deterministic assumptions, there is no guarantee of a predicted effect. Thus, it is chaotic.

The co-authored, co-interpretation process of My Career Chapter (McIlveen & du Preez, 2012) entails the client engaging in a process of writing to self and to the counsellor, whereby both share their written interpretations, toward the generation of *hope-narratives*. This follows the technique used to generate *self-efficacy narratives* (Preez, 2012). The hope-narratives are autobiographical renderings of hope that emerge through the written, co-interpretation process. The client should be guided to write the hope-narratives in a manner that reflects the components of hope described by Sndyer and colleagues (1995; 2005), namely: goals, agency-thoughts and pathway-thoughts, and outcome-value.

It is important that the client be encouraged to continue to elaborate the hope-narratives. In what I describe as the empirical "missing-link", the study by Strauss, Griffin, and Parker (2012) demonstrates a predictive relationship between the salience of a person's imagined work-self in the future and proactive career-relate behaviour. Furthermore, elaboration of future self has an impact on career behaviour when future work-self is clearly imagined and salient. The implications for narrative career counselling methods, including My Career Chapter, are significant. The study affirms the value of generating narratives in career counselling and lends support to the suggestion that narratives positively effect behaviour. Thus, hope-narratives might have the effect of inducing shift in the pendulum attractor that is repetition compulsion.

Future Research

In this section, I describe an inchoate intervention, fluttering-hope. It is an idea that has emerged from reflexive practice under supervision (e.g., McIlveen & Patton, 2010; Noble & McIlveen, 2012). The intervention is an extension of the process of interpretation of themes that are generated through the use of My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2011, in press; McIlveen & du Preez, 2012). It is yet to be empirically tested in conditions analogous to the real world of counselling, and it is yet to be evaluated by field-trials. Therefore, its implementation should be done cautiously and evaluated.

With respect to CTC's theoretical substance, hypothesis testing, and subjecting the CTC to vigorous empirical scrutiny, there is a need to use complex statistical modelling procedures to test the CTC's use of attractors as core constructs. Traditional experimental and quasi-experimental designs are no longer sufficient now that methods such as structural equation modelling and multi-level linear modelling are nigh on being standard practice in the research journals, and increasing so in the applied research journals for professional. Given that complex mathematical modelling is deployed in other disciplines to describe and predict dynamic constructs, such as economics, meteorology, or astronomy, what potential might there be to capture a strange attractor in the life of a single person or the ideas and practices of an occupation as they evolve over time? Imagine the extraordinary potential of streams of real-time, digital data collection methods ensuring that there are sufficient data to trace the propagation of a career attractor over an extended period of time.

Conclusion

The CTC provides a conceptual and practical antidote to the proliferation of pernicious "self-help" literature that purports techniques for career management in the world-of-work that is, in bleak reality, fraught with inequity and iniquity. CTC confronts failure, sympathetically and practically. With so many career-related metaphors at their disposal, charlatans take an inch and, metaphorically, run a mile with their glib slogans and empirically untested propositions. On the other hand, Pryor and Bright present carefully crafted metaphors drawn from chaos theory, an

emerging body of concomitant empirical evidence, and professional resources for practitioners. Critical reflexive practice, and research and evaluation, will test the boundaries of CTC's capacity to generate new theoretical and professional innovations. On this count, the CTC has facilitated the current transtheoretical formulation of fluttering-hope as new counselling technique that aims to generate shift in the pendulum attractor of a reaction compulsion that leads a person to failure. It, too, must pass the test of empirical rigour and practical utility.

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