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A PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATION OF QUALITATIVE CAREER ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter entails a consideration of the philosophical dimensions of career assessment as an act of social construction. As a philosophical chapter that necessarily renders our own values in this text, we declare our endorsement of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen & Davis, 1985) and the Systems Theory Framework of career development (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014). Indeed, we present this statement quite deliberately for we believe it is incumbent upon all scholars and practitioners who engage in a process of a philosophical consideration to metaphorically wear their epistemic and professional values on their sleeves to ensure transparency and understanding (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013). Thus, the chapter begins with a selection of historical moments in the evolution of the field of career development. We present a caution that career assessment—qualitative and quantitative—is itself an historical, culturally constructed entity that manifests the power of career practitioners afforded them by clients' unwitting collusion with the discourse of career. We then present a conceptualisation of narrative through the lens of social constructionism.

Career Assessment as a Social Construction: A Psychotechnology

The close of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries was an era of technology, industry, immigration, and war. In this tumultuous time, one finds the likes of social reformer Frank Parsons (1909) whose commitment to the employment of immigrants saw the emergence of what can only be described as the classical model of career assessment, and the philosopher of education and society, John Dewey (1916), who extolled the inseparability of learning and work as the foundation of democratic society. In this era *vocational psychology* (Hollingworth, 1916) emerged as a branch of a new discipline, *applied psychology*, otherwise known as “psychotechnics” or “psychotechnology” (Geissler, 1917).

Yet, it was an era in which the scientific assessment of a person and the capacity for work was, by current standards, inchoate and unsophisticated, but it was already flexing its power as a scientific discourse. The quotation below is drawn from a paper in which the author discusses the role of individuals with an intellectual disability in the Great War, WWI.

The moron fits into the cogs of a big system with very little friction. He is content to eat and sleep and dress and work as a part of a machine with machine-like regularity. Such monotony he can understand and appreciate (Mateer, 1917).

The contemporary scholar may recoil at the ostensibly discriminatory language because these words speak more than what is written. The lines should alert

one to reflect on the current discourse of career assessment and counselling (cf., McIlveen & Patton, 2006). The lines are indicative of a discourse of power whereby the client/the subject of the assessment is in the gaze of the practitioner. Regardless of whether career assessments entails quantitative and/or qualitative procedures, both are instruments of an agent whose power is dependent upon the very discourse that is used to theorise, formulate, and assess the apparent needs of the client. The agent in this case is the practitioner. This assertion should be read as a warning against *presentist bias*—that of adjudging past standards by current standards (cf., Thorne & Henley, 2005). Just as the misuse of psychometrics has been criticised (e.g., McIlveen & Patton, 2006), social constructionism's epistemological and rhetorical discourse for qualitative career assessment makes it just as much a tool of power; for it is within the dialogue of counselling that the practitioner has the power to manipulate what is deemed meaningful. This power is writ large in the notion of *co-construction* whereby the client and practitioner together develop a narrative for the client. Of course, a practitioner's intentions should be caring; however, the fact is that the practitioner is inherently in the process of co-construction, and not an objective observer on the side.

Cultures, mores, and conventions evolve with societies and the meaning of work concomitantly evolves. Thus, it is apposite to consider the philosophical roots of the meaning of work in people's lives (cf., Blustein, 2006). As a paradigm for the formulation and application of theories and practices of career assessment, social constructionism emphasises the contextual, historical ways of being, knowing, and doing (Young & Popadiuk, 2012). However, taking a contextual perspective is not simply a matter of gathering facts in a career assessment interview and arriving at an understanding of a client's environment; to the social constructionist, context it is much more. To be precise, social constructionists attend to context by way of discourse and its capacity to create knowledge/power (cf. Foucault, 1972). This is a crucial assumption upon which to proceed because it is the axis of the turn toward discursive psychology and radical formulations of sense of self promulgated by scholars such as Hermans (2006). But, first, in order to arrive at that radical perspective and to provide a vehicle for social constructionist thinking of work and career, we must turn to the STF as a conceptual framework for career development that decentres the individual amidst a context of influences and provides a new way to apprehend the meaning of work in people's lives.

Systems Theory Framework, the Decentred Individual, and Four-dimensionality

The social constructionist paradigm can be manifested by application of the Systems Theory Framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Although the STF lends itself to other paradigms, Patton and McMahon have tended toward social constructionism in their scholarship of career counselling that is informed by the STF (e.g., McMahon & Patton, 2006). The STF's contextualisation of the individual extends from the intrapersonal influences that are embodied in the individual (e.g., physical attributes, values) through to the influences that constitute the individual's interpersonal, social world (e.g., friendships, family), and the environmental-societal system (e.g., school, work, government). From the perspective of the STF, an individual cannot be empathically understood as an entity that is ontologically distinct from context; he or she can be understood only as a person-in-context. Seen

objectively, the multiple influences in the STF are understood to be in a state of flux, constantly evolving as a result of their recursive effects on one another, concomitantly manifesting the influence of chance, happenstance, or *Acts of God*. The STF also requires the scholar to historicise the individual. Accordingly, a person cannot be empathically understood as a psychological snapshot at a point in time; he or she has a past, present, and imagined future. In sum, the STF presents a four-dimensional framework of an individual: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental-societal influences, in and across time.

The ontological understanding of the dimension of time in this paradigm aligns with the theory of four-dimensionalism, which seeks to explain the long-standing question of how objects persist and change through time (Koslicki, 2003). The theory of four-dimensionalism (Sider, 2001, 2003) posits that objects, which could include people and events (Rea, 2003), have temporal parts, and therefore can persist and change through time. For example, a steaming hot cup of tea can be described as having certain properties. One of those properties is a temporal one: it exists in the now in which it is observed or experienced. One hour later, the same cup of tea may still be sitting on the desk, un-sipped. In that case, according to the four-dimensionalist stance, it is understood to be the same object, with some of the same properties as before, but also with some different properties. There has been a change in the property of relative temperature—from hot to cold—and it also has a different temporal property (it is one hour later than the previous time). For four-dimensional theory, the steaming hot cup of tea now and the cooled cup of tea in one hour's time have the same ontological status of existence. As Rea (2003) explains, objects which are not present owing to different temporary properties (e.g., being in the future or past) are like objects that are not present due to different spatial properties (e.g., being in another country or on another planet). Both objects exist; they just do not exist where/when we are (here and now).

It may seem pedantic to discuss the ontological status of objects that are distant in time; however, four-dimensionalism suggests a radically alternative ontological stance from which to examine the concepts encompassed in the notion of career assessment. Much that has been written about career assessment conceptualises it as a static three-dimensional object or state, that is, it can be described without reference to specific time. We would argue that career assessment is ontologically four-dimensional, and that its temporal properties are significant. According to this four-dimensional view, the notion of 'person' cannot be completely dissociated from past, present and future experiences. To remove the past and future and capture only the present, is to capture a caricature of the concept of person: one that has been artificially reduced for the purposes of recording and analysis. Indeed, it is impossible to apprehend a person's identity without including stories of the past, present, and future, all spoken and read as a continuous biography, albeit with twists, turns, and stories *told, untold, silenced, and/or forgotten* (cf., McMahon, 2006).

Imagine a personal photo album. At the front of the album there are photos of a person who is younger, perhaps a child. Over time, new photographs are added to the album. Naturally enough, the subject of the photographs appears to age with the turning of each page of the album. Each photograph is a snapshot in time and one can discern physical changes in the subject over time. Yet, the album is silent. Although a picture is worth a thousand words, in this album the photographs per se do not speak; they do not tell a story. It is the

beholder of the photographs who creates and tells a story by describing the events in each, and their connections to other photographs on previous and subsequent pages, in other points in space and time. The aim of career assessment is to collect, select, and reflect on the images and experiences of a life, and to connect them together as a coherent story that is incomplete and open-ended, and that is understood as an ongoing conversation with oneself and the world.

A radical approach to social constructionism holds the ontological assumption that: (a) a person's reality is socially constructed; (b) reality is psychologically experienced; and, moreover, (c) experience is constituted of psychological representations of discourses that are culturally mediated in and across time. In other words, there is not an essential self within a person; instead, a person's sense of self is a rendering of the discourses that have spoken and currently speak a person into the present and anticipated future reality the person experiences. Indeed, social constructionism assumes that "the most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 172). Thus, a person's sense of self is utterly bound by discourse and culture. Stories and storying, therefore, are the grist of identity, subjectively experienced and objectively described. Accordingly, we assert that, along with context and time, story is an ontological and epistemological tenet that constitutes the rhetoric and methods of qualitative career assessment.

STF and Story

Rather than considered as the site of isolated facts to be assessed, the influences identified in the STF can be made meaningful through the *process influence* of story. Patton and McMahon (2014) posit story as an important element of meaning-making, both subjectively from the client's perspective and objectively from the practitioner's perspective. In this way, a client may tell a story about his/her life autobiographically, and a practitioner may formulate a story of his/her life as a biography.

Transcending the subjective-objective dichotomy of the client-practitioner stories, adherence to the STF as a social constructionist framework requires the practitioner to consider the convergence of the influences of the client and practitioner. From a classical perspective, this convergence may be seen as the transference-countertransference dynamic. However, social constructionists depart from the classical position because they must assume that the talk and action that go on between client and practitioner constitute a form of co-construction. Co-construction implies a joint effort. Patton and McMahon (2014) depict this confluence of influences as the STF influences of client and practitioner enclosed as a "therapeutic system" (p. 368).

A significant implication of this view of career assessment pertains to the knowledge and power relations within the therapeutic system. Career assessment as a process per se and the technology it deploys (e.g., psychometric tests, qualitative interview schedules) are a discursive practice that is administered by professionals who have their own sub-cultural discourse that is constitutive of a form of knowledge and power (McIlveen & Patton, 2006). For example, two career practitioners talking about a client's interests as being *realistic* and *investigative*, as in Holland (1997) typology, or as a client's *career theme*, as in Savickas (2011) model of narrative career counselling, may very well understand one another; however, the meaning of these words do not necessarily nor immediately convey the same for the client.

Thus, the idea of confluence between client and practitioner requires a commitment to reflexive practice whereby a practitioner develops a subjective and an objectified awareness of his/her dialogue and influence within the therapeutic system, perhaps by professional supervision (Patton & McMahon, 2014) or self-supervision (McIlveen & Patton, 2010).

The Process of Storying Through Time

Story may be an historical account of one's life, or it may be an open-ended narrative that portends possible futures and, moreover, through the lens of the STF, story can be theorised in terms of the psychological processes of *dialogical self* (McIlveen, 2007). In this way, a person's story may be generated from different personal perspectives or *I-positions* (Hermans, 2006) that are constitutive of the multiple influences identified in the STF. Furthermore, these different I-positions may engage in dialogue with one another, thereby decentring the individual to include influences beyond the boundaries of his/her flesh as constitutive of his/her reality, and these influences may have temporal dimensions of past, present and/or anticipated future. As much a personal narrative generated by oneself, in social constructionist terms, story is necessarily a dialogue that is shared and created with others who comprise the contextual influences of an individual.

Although reinterpretation of the past is inherent to social constructionist career assessment, particularly through a process of co-construction with the practitioner, simply interpreting a person's past as if it were a collection of bygone facts is not necessarily social constructionism. To assess, as in to engage in a process of career assessment, implies that there is an entity to assess, to observe, to capture, to appraise, to somehow measure. Here, the very words compel one to construct an entity, firmly fixed in time, in the process of assessing. Represented as word, image or sensation, the entity that is assessed is pragmatically real enough to the beholder—the client, the practitioner. Here, we present a vision of career assessment that is radically social constructionist in its philosophy and demonstrate how coming to know a sense of one's self through career assessment and its attendant processes (e.g., co-construction) is more than simply reinterpreting the past so as to effectively operate in the present world-of-work. More than this, social constructionism holds that meaning does not reside in one's head, as it were, in a mentalist sense; instead, meaning resides in discourses that are spoken, read, and signed as cultures.

This ontological and epistemological emphasis implies that the process of knowing and the product of knowing—knowledge—are contingent upon processes and products that have gone before. Adherence to the social constructionist paradigm requires one to accept that what is (re)created as to be new in the present time has a relationship from whence it came. Thus, what is deemed new in the present time is not completely new; ontologically, it persists as a lived reality. With respect to career assessment, one may develop a new perspective of one's sense of self by: (a) learning new ways of knowing; so as to (b) produce new knowledge of one's sense of self in the world; and consequently (c) to act out one's career in the world on the basis of the new way of knowing one's sense of self. All of these processes operate in and through time.

Conclusion

The presumed epistemological differences between quantitative and qualitative career assessment methods are not manifest in a person's lived experience of a career story; that is, the story the person knows, rehearses, and revises over time. Regardless of whether a person's story is generated on the basis of personality tests or creative writing, the process of storying and making meaning through the rhetoric and methods of quantitative and qualitative career assessment is the same: the person constructs a psychological reality in conversation with the practitioner (and others). That a person's personality is objectively described as XYZ type matters little; what matters most is how the person and others, especially the practitioner, talk and write about being an XYZ type—this is the reification of identity in talk and text as story. Thus, we directly appeal to you—the reader—to consider the philosophical foundations on which you construct your career development practice and ensure that there is correspondence between the assumptions of what you believe constitutes reality (i.e., ontology); how you know and create knowledge (i.e., epistemology), how and what you value as knowledge (i.e., axiology); how you use the technical language, words, and symbols of knowledge (i.e., rhetoric, discourse); and, most of all, how you put all of the aforementioned into practice.

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