

A (guided) meta-reflection theory of career counselling: A case study

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Abstract

Major changes in the global economy over the past decades have resulted in increased levels of work- and career-related uncertainty. Workers are continually confronted with issues of restructuring and transformation in the workplace. The theory and practice of career counselling need reshaping to enable young people to design successful lives and adapt to changing needs, changing interests and novel work experiences. Globally, career counselling theorists have taken on the challenge of revisiting and revising extant career theories to enable them to provide a time-appropriate service to their clients. This article discusses the theoretical base for a novel career counselling strategy that entails guiding clients to reflect and meta-reflect on their own career-related responses. A case study is discussed. It is hoped that the explicated strategy will provide career counsellors with a strategy to help clients choose not only appropriate careers but also use these careers to design and live successful lives.

Major changes in the global economy are a cause for concern in South Africa, and many other developing countries, especially given the rising unemployment figures. The situation in South Africa is exacerbated by the high failure rate of students at institutions of higher learning (Maree 2010a), the effect this has on the lives of numerous people (students who do not complete their studies join the swelling ranks of the unemployed), and on the national economy where the required 6 per cent economic growth rate is still far from being achieved (Maree 2010a). The lack of career counselling, and the negative impact of this on tertiary training, also reinforces the low social and economic position of poor and marginalised people in the country. Very few disadvantaged students receive adequate career counselling, and they often arrive at institutions of higher learning without a clear idea of what their prospective careers actually entail (Maree 2009; Maree, Ebersöhn and Molepo 2006; Maree and Molepo 2007). Research also shows that intervention programmes to correct this situation have largely failed (Maree 2010a).

Because workers are continually confronted with issues of restructuring and transformation in the workplace, training institutions and, indeed, the theory and practice of career counselling, need reshaping to enable young people to design successful lives and, in doing so, adapt to changing needs, changing interests and novel experiences (Savickas 2008; 2009b; 2009c). However, career-counselling

problems, demonstrated by the following comment (Flederman 2008, 27, note added): '*graduate unemployment identified [that] graduates who are African and from non-traditional universities [are] the most likely to be unemployed among graduate cohorts*', continue to play a major role in many students' failure and the failure of disadvantaged students in particular (Maree et al. 2006; Maree and Molepo 2007). The consensus of global leaders in career counselling seems to be that whereas counsellors and lecturers require vision and motivation, students require proper career counselling to give them a clear sense of the future, an idea of what career to strive for, a reason for working hard and guidelines to help them design successful lives and holding environments in the context of career construction theory (Savickas 2009a; 2009b). In my opinion, students and clients in general need to be guided towards discovering themselves by reflecting and meta-reflecting on their lives at any given point in time (for example, when they present for career counselling).

CHANGES TAKING PLACE IN THE WORLD OF WORK GLOBALLY: THE NEED FOR A NEW THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CAREER COUNSELLING

To properly understand the need for a changed approach to career counselling in 2011, we first have to understand the shifts that have taken place in the field since its formal inception some 120 years ago with the work of Frank Parsons (1909; 2005). New careers requiring new skills and attitudes are constantly emerging, and career counselling has to keep abreast of these developments if it is to remain relevant in post-modern society (Savickas 2006a; 2006b; Watson 2004). I agree with Savickas et al. (2009) when they say that the value of 20th century career theory and practice is indisputable, yet that, at the same time, it should be acknowledged that current approaches have become inadequate over time and no longer serve the needs of the 21st century student population. The time has come to rethink the generally (and often uncritically) accepted underpinnings of 20th century career and vocational theories and strategies (Savickas et al. 2009).

The basic assumption of stability underlying existing career theories and strategies seems to no longer be viable. In the latest career counselling theories work is regarded as best utilised by people to discover their own identity, find holding environments, achieve self-completion (find deep meaning in their lives) and make social contributions (Savickas 2002; 2005). To find practical ways of dealing with change and the impact of change, Savickas (2006a; 2006b; 2007) has demonstrated how different theories can be brought together to form an eloquent theory of career counselling by blending the psychodynamic approach with the differential and developmental approaches to create an overarching career counselling approach. Cochran (1997), on the other hand, argues that the narrative approach to career counselling offers a way to work with personal meanings (an aspect which while being acknowledged in the 'traditional', objective view of career counselling practice

deserves more attention). His approach also expands and uses appropriate strategies and techniques to enable people to play meaningful roles in their own life stories. Lastly, the narrative approach can be broadened to other career issues such as the job search.

RATIONALE FOR THIS ARTICLE

The above paragraphs have shown that career counselling as a discipline has seen many exciting changes and advances over the past two decades. A shift has taken place to a multi-method approach that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment, data gathering and counselling (Maree and Molepo 2007). Increased emphasis on identifying deep-seated, stable strengths and motives and on using innovative techniques characterises career counselling today. However, it remains an open question whether this approach to career counselling can be tailored to and applied successfully in a developing country context such as the South African context. In this article, I will outline the theoretical and conceptual framework of the theory of guided meta-reflection that I am advocating in this article. I will begin by focussing on the existential-phenomenological theory. Next, I will briefly outline social constructivism, followed by career construction and life design (see Figure 1).

EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Many authors have argued that career counselling is personal counselling and that career counselling theorists have been influenced by contemporary personality and personality-related theories including the following (Phares 1992; Maree 2002): psychodynamic theories, (Adler 1933; Freud 1963); behaviour theories (Skinner 1974); social learning theories (Rotter 1954) and existential-phenomenological theory (Rogers 1959; 1961; 1977). The existential-phenomenological view, with its non-deterministic view and its emphasis on a person's inner world, holds that individuals' perceptions of the world constitute the main factor influencing their behaviour (Rogers 1951) and that the role of personal choice and agency is paramount in regards to major life decisions (Teixeira and Gomes 2000). In line with the approach of authors such as Phares (1992) and Valle and King (1978), I have opted to discuss the existential and phenomenological perspectives together because of their shared, non-deterministic world-view.

From a person-centred point of view, the belief is that human beings cannot be fully measured and understood, and, consequently, emphasis is placed on the qualitative nature, the being, the origin, and the meaningful existence and destination of a person. The humanistic approach regards hereditary and environmental limitations as factors that can be overcome by mental exertion. Human beings can transcend or step out of themselves, as it were. In other words, it is important for human beings to realise the importance of looking back and reflecting (and meta-reflecting) on their thoughts and actions. Human beings can, and should, accept responsibility for their

actions; they are free to choose and are not subject to fate or circumstances beyond their control (Rogers 1951).

Clearly, Rogers' (1951) approach impacted on career counselling practice to a significant extent and it is clear that his work was ahead of its time in the career counselling practice. Rogers' (1951) approach is summarised in the belief that every human being deserves respect, unconditional positive regard, has worth and can make informed decisions based on his or her own reflections and meta-reflections (George and Christiani 1990).

Young and Valach (2004) remind us that the existential-phenomenological worldview stresses notions such as individual experience, choice and agency (Teixeira and Gomes 2000). Human beings are considered masters of their own fate; they can 'guide, regulate and control [themselves]' (Rogers 1951, in George and Christiani 1990, 58). Interpersonal, intrapersonal and adaptation problems, as well as stressful lives, can interfere with a person's self-actualization. The esteem and self-actualization parts of Maslow's (1987) hierarchy highlight the relevance of occupations for the satisfaction of needs.

In summary: the existential view emphasizes a person's individuality, uniqueness and irreplaceability. It also emphasizes his or her potential and right to reflect and meta-reflect on and transcend his or her limitations. Ziller (2000, 265) concludes that irrefutable evidence exists that people are capable of reflecting on their own actions: *persons are their own agents of change*.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM THEORY'

O'Hanlon (1994) refers to the family therapy movement (narrative and constructionism) as the fourth wave in psychology. Social constructionism theory is grounded in the belief that people construct reality socially through the use of shared and agreed-upon meanings communicated through language, social interaction and relationships. Reality and knowledge are therefore subjective, and objective neutrality is impossible (Doan 1997). Knowledge and meaning are actively constructed through social interaction and relationships within a specific context.

Young and Valach (2004, 508) remind us that 'in many respects, the notion of agency is central to some approaches to career'. Cochran (1997, 3), arguing from a narrative perspective, describes an agent as 'one who makes things happen' whereas patients allow life to happen to them. Lent, Brown and Hackett (1996) see agency in terms of beliefs about self-efficacy. Unless people believe that they have the capabilities to produce the expected or desired outcomes, there is little reason for them to act on the basis of such desired outcomes.

In the next section, I will first review the theory of career construction, then I will expand on the notion of life design counselling (including career adaptability), and, lastly, I will report on a case study to illustrate the theoretical perspective proposed here.

CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY

Career construction theory is derived from the naturalistic (interpretive) paradigm described by authors such as Savickas (2002; 2005; 2006a; 2007) and Hartung (2007; 2010), and based largely on Savickas' (2005) hallmark contribution. This theory updates Super's (1957; 1990) lifespan, life space theory and, more specifically, Super's portrayal of the developmental perspective on vocational choice and adjustment. Career construction theory and practice act as a grand meta-theory that blends three core career theoretical traditions: (1) individual development (the developmental approach – Super 1990), (2) psychodynamic motivation (life themes and the narrative approach) and (3) individual differences (the differential approach or person-environment fit – Parsons 1909; 2005) into an overarching theory of occupational and vocational behaviour.

I will now discuss the role of narrative counselling as a paradigm for blending the theoretical dimensions dealt with above.

NARRATIVE COUNSELLING

Post-modern career facilitation, of which narrative therapy is a corollary, is considered an umbrella term. To ensure narrative career counselling, the client should be viewed as an informed individual who has not before had adequate opportunity to apply his or her own abilities in making sense of his or her problems (Cochran 1997; 2011). The client is considered the protagonist in his or her own drama (emplotment) (Cochran 1997; 2011). Storied career facilitation starts when the facilitator creates a safe atmosphere within which people, who are shown respect throughout, are invited (instead of asked) to share their stories.

Career construction theory is supported by the philosophy underpinning the narrative paradigm. The career story interview (Savickas 2005) and three anecdotes technique (Maree 2010d) is used from this theoretical perspective to gather information on and transform the four theoretical approaches (listed in the previous section) into practice, that is, into a constructivist career counselling strategy and methods that encourage clients to (re-)author their lives and career stories. In doing so, they enhance their chance to experience work as a personally meaningful endeavour and context for further development and for making a social contribution.

LIFE DESIGN COUNSELLING

Savickas (2005) first started with Super's (1990) model, then proceeded to career construction, and then shifted to life design for career counselling (Savickas et al. 2009). Savickas et al. (2009) maintain that a new social arrangement of work poses a series of questions and challenges to people who wish to be useful to others as they develop their working lives. Because their life design framework for career counselling puts into practice Guichard's (2005) theory of self-constructing and Savickas' (2005) theory of career construction – both of which describe occupational

behaviour and its development – it is structured to be life-long, holistic, contextual and preventive. Factors that can influence the process of life design are discussed next.

THEORETICAL ORIGINS OF CAREER ADAPTABILITY

Career development stages and tasks are covered in Super’s (1990) career development theory. Career construction is a later addition to Super’s (1957) lifespan, life space theory (Hartung 2007) and includes four fundamental dimensions of career behaviour, namely life structure, career adaptability, career personality and life themes. The segments of Super’s theory covered by career construction are growth, exploration, establishment, management and decline. The career adaptability segment of career construction theory refers to career development tasks and role transitions as well as to strategies for dealing with the challenge of working through developmental tasks and negotiating role transitions (Hartung 2010).

The above discussion indicates that even though multiple theories and theoretical orientations have shaped the meta-reflection theory of career counselling, a number of epistemological approaches in particular serve as the foundations of the above-mentioned theory.

In the next section, I will endeavour to show how what I have just said can be merged into a theoretical conceptual framework for career counselling aimed at enabling clients to reflect on their own reflections about their life stories, uncover advice to themselves from within (Figure 1), decide on careers that can realise their major life themes and optimise the realisation of their potential.

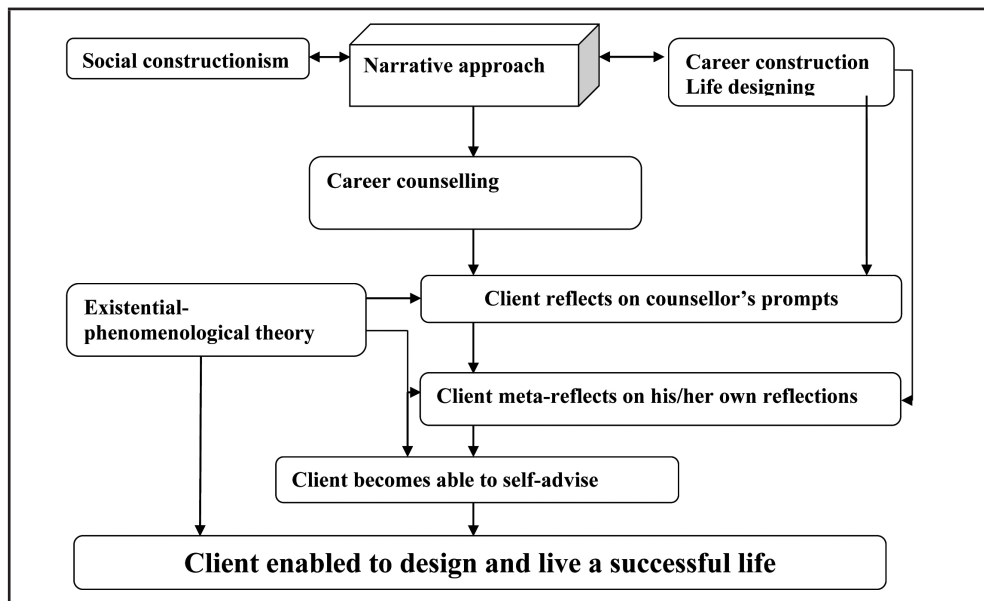


Figure 1: A meta-reflection theory of career counselling

A META-REFLECTION THEORY OF CAREER COUNSELLING (MAREE 2010B)

It is generally agreed that the dynamics of a person's early life (his or her relationships with other family members providing the critical mass of these dynamics) shape the person's life and continue to do so for the rest of his or her life (Maree 2010b). The trauma, pain and unresolved issues (and, of course, positive experiences as well) that stem from a person's early years remain a part of him or her forever. Also, people's lives are shaped continually by numerous influences as they make their way through various life contexts, negotiating repeated crossroads (e.g. leaving the womb, leaving the mother's holding arms, leaving home for school, leaving school to study or work) along the way. By communicating through language (verbally and non-verbally) and social interaction (social constructionism), life stories (autobiographies) are continually scripted and lived by the people concerned. Whenever a new crossroad is encountered, a well of prior knowledge is at the disposal of the person as he or she attempts to deal with every new transition, no matter how big or small it is (Maree 2010b).

I concur with the view (Rogers 1951; Teixeira and Gomes 2000) that people facing transitions are not left to the mercy of 'fate', are not powerless and do not make choices in a predetermined manner. On the contrary: although subconscious motives and drives, as well as behaviour learned in social contexts, influence human behaviour long after the early childhood years have passed, meta-reflection theory (as advocated in this article) draws from the existential-phenomenological belief that people themselves (and not others on their behalf) can decide against being haunted forever by a painful and traumatic past and can transcend adversity and lack of resources. The aim of the counselling advocated in this model is to facilitate personal agency in clients. The assignment of career counsellors is therefore to enable clients to reflect on their lives and then reflect on these reflections (meta-reflection) so that they can transcend their own limitations, and, thereby, advise themselves on how best to address crossroads that inevitably entail making career choices.

What I am also saying is that it is not a question of one approach versus another or an either/or approach (i.e. using one approach to the exclusion of the other) but, rather, a matter of using the best of both approaches (quantitative and qualitative) in career counselling. In addition, I believe that the power of early childhood experiences (and memories, where possible) should be factored into any career counselling approach (e.g. the three anecdotes technique (Maree 2010d)).

A discursive (narrative) approach is needed to facilitate the process outlined above. By reflecting on his or her own reflections under the watchful and empathetic eye of the counsellor, guided meta-reflection can take place. Clients gain perspective about their life scripts, discover who they are and decide for themselves where they are headed. This includes not only the choice of a career but, more importantly, the discovery of their major life themes (tantamount to uncovering the themes of a novel). In terms of the meta-reflection theory or approach, clients should continually be encouraged to advise themselves (finding meaning in their own responses to

career-counselling questions), something that can be achieved through guided meta-reflection (where they are guided to identify their main life themes first and then decide on a job or a career). Clients can also re-author (aspects of) their stories, if necessary, in order to persevere in their efforts to design and actually live successful lives (the ultimate goal of counselling). The one voice that will remain contemporary, valid, reliable and permanent in the lives of clients will be their own voice, and they can draw on this voice whenever they face a new crossroads.

In summary: the cornerstones of the approach discussed in this article are (1) career construction (discovering what traits one has: this can be done with psychometric tests in combination with qualitative techniques, how one adapts and develops traits, and one's life themes, i.e. why one moves in a certain direction); (2) meta-reflection (reflecting on initial reflections about one's basic life story); and (3) self-advising (based on an existential-phenomenological worldview by means of which clients can design and live successful lives). Advice dispensed by an 'expert' career counsellor is rarely the 'answer' to people's career counselling needs (Crites 1981). Clients should above all realise that 'true', meaningful advice can be given only by themselves to themselves – the result of meta-reflection (or meta-self-reflection). At the outset of any counselling relationship, clients should also realise that decisions should never be made about fragments of their lives in isolation (e.g. the choice of subjects, schools, fields of study or 'careers'). The major emphasis should be on becoming the architects of their own lives. In other words, constructing, designing and living successful lives that enable them to adapt repeatedly to new situations in order to realise their potential optimally and make social contributions.

In order to provide clients with more appropriate career counselling, the guided meta-(self-) reflection approach discussed above needs to be applied successfully in practice and demonstrably linked to useful outcomes. The goals of the case study will be dealt with first.

GOALS OF THE CASE STUDY

Broad goals of the study:

- The first goal of the study was to propose a theoretical framework that could be tailored and applied by career counselling practitioners to help thousands of students, especially those from the poorest and most marginalised sectors of society who have received little or no career counselling and are consequently either excluded from sought-after fields of study at institutions of higher learning or lose interest in their studies after having enrolled for particular fields of study.²
- The second goal of the study was to demonstrate the practical implementation of the theoretical framework.

METHOD

Participant and context

The client was a conveniently selected young woman. The parents of Emily³ a 17-year-old girl in Grade 12, consulted me (the author of this article) during the second half of 2010 for guidance on the choice of a career. During the intake interview, it was agreed with the parents that a combined quantitative-qualitative assessment would be conducted.

Mode of inquiry

The study was based on an interpretivist paradigm (Patton and McMahon 1999) involving understanding and interpreting meanings as revealed during interactions with the client. The qualitative research design (Creswell 2007) comprised a case study (McMillan and Schumacher 2001).

PROCEDURE: QUALITATIVE DATA-GATHERING PLAN

Ethics

Measures to ensure Emily's welfare were implemented throughout the study. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents and from Emily, and confidentiality was guaranteed and maintained. I gave feedback to Emily during all the phases of the study. Care was taken to ensure that she and her parents fully understood the feedback, and sufficient time was allowed for clarification. The parents were charged for the counselling service (which was rendered in a private practice context).

Data gathering

Psychometric instruments. The psychometric tests used in the study included the *Differential Aptitude Test (SAT-L)* (Owen 2000), the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* (Briggs and Briggs Myers 1990), the *Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank (RMIB)* (Hall, Halstead and Taylor 1986), the *Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes – Form H (SSHA)* (Brown and Holtzman 1974) and the *South African Vocational Interest Inventory (SAVII)* (Du Toit 1992). The tests were scored by me.

Qualitative techniques. Qualitative data were gathered during in-depth (one-on-one, semi-structured) interviews and oral discussions with Emily and by observing her (for the interview schedule, see the results section below). The *Career Interest Profile (CIP)* (Version 2) (Maree 2010c) and its narrative supplement were employed to facilitate data collection from the narrative paradigm. It should be stressed that the *CIP* is a qualitative career-counselling instrument and not a psychometric instrument as such.

Process

Because the client lived some 400 km from the town where the assessment was conducted, it was agreed with the parents that the assessment would be concluded in a single day (taking roughly seven hours to complete, with a number of breaks in between). The parents and the client were interviewed to start off with, after which the assessment process began. The quantitative assessment was followed by the qualitative assessment during which the *CIP* and the timeline were administered (the client was requested to prepare a collage upfront and to write her life story and bring the script along on the day of the assessment). Later, I conducted a concluding interview with the parents and the client.

Data analysis and interpretation

Narrative techniques used included a timeline, a collage and the life story (Cochran 1997; 2011). A ‘standard’ set of quantitative tests was administered, but, due to space constraints in this article, only the results of the qualitative part of the assessment are reported in full here. As can be seen (see below) from the quantitative assessment results, there was, however, a strong positive relationship between the quantitative and the qualitative data (narrative assessment).

- a. *SAVII* (Du Toit 1992): The client’s highest preferred interest categories were *Social Service*, *Artistic* and *Business and Management*. She showed a particular preference for
 - educational, social and personal services; and nursing and caring services;
 - language and entertainment (actualising her creativity in a free environment);
 - organizing and management (acting in an enterprising manner).
- b. *Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank (RMIB)* (Hall et al. 1986): The client’s highest interest category patterns were *Aesthetic* (being creative/designing); *Social Service* (working with people in a helpful or supportive capacity); *Persuasive* (meeting and dealing with people, managing or organising); *Musical* (making or listening to music); and *Literary* (reading, writing, working with words).
- c. *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* (Briggs and Briggs Myers 1990) (*MBTI* code: *ESFJ*): The client had communication, nurturance and people orientation skills, and she placed a high value on interpersonal harmony. She was orderly and attentive to details, particularly when the details supported her people values. She was interested in pragmatic, realistic activities and had little patience for the purely abstract. She needed contact with others in her career, appreciated structure in her work environment and generally adapted well to routine.

In my opinion, the main difference between the two modes of assessment lies in the way the results were obtained and interpreted. In the case of the quantitative part of the study, the test results yielded a number of *fields of study*; in the case of the qualitative part of the study, the client’s reflections on her own reflections uncovered *major life themes* (as suggested in career construction theory, Hartung 2010; Savickas 2005; see Table 1. These themes were used by me (the counsellor) and the client to

arrive at fields of study that would enable the client to make meaning, fit work into her life, design and live a successful life, and make a social contribution.

An inductive data analysis approach was followed in order to identify a number of life themes. The tests were scored only after the inductive process had taken place to prevent contamination of the process and to prevent it from becoming more of a deductive process. Emily's responses were read back to her verbatim, and she was informed of the importance of identifying her major life themes first and only then deciding on a career as a vehicle to realise her life themes and make a social contribution. She was later asked to 'reflect upon [her] reflections' and to tell me (the counsellor) which themes she could identify from her responses. Minimal interpretation was done by me (the counsellor). This was done in order to enable Emily to identify the main themes in her narratives enabling her to listen to herself and at the same time enabling her and the career counsellor to determine whether their understanding of Emily's inner world was accurate (Rogers 1951).

After the results of the qualitative part of the assessment had been discussed, the results of the quantitative assessment were communicated to Emily and her mother (the parent who attended counselling with Emily). Emily was frequently requested to reflect on the crosswalk/crossover between the two sets of results (triangulation took place), and she eventually (co-)constructed a list of fields of study she could analyse to arrive at an informed choice. Careful analysis of the quantitative results did not add meaningfully to the list of fields of study that Emily had chosen to 'job analyse' after having accessed the qualitative results. In other words, the qualitative aspect was sufficient to help her uncover her interests, etc., and the quantitative aspect actually added little additional data.

RESULTS

Emily's preferred interest categories according to the *Career Interest Profile* (Maree 2010c) were as follows:

1. Social, care-giving, community services and teaching
2. Medical and paramedical services
3. Practical-creative and consumer science
4. Executive and management practice
5. Tourism, hospitality and the tourist transportation industry.

Her responses to the questions posed in the *Career Interest Profile Narrative Supplement* (Maree 1986; Maree 2010c) appear below. The responses are given with minimal editing (id est., only glaring language errors were corrected). (The assessment was done in English.)

1. How can I be of use to you as you design your career? (Savickas 2005) (Emily's responses are in *italics*.)

By guiding and advising me on the most suitable career so I can help other persons.

2a. What are your

i) strengths?

Leading or guiding people. When asked to elaborate on what she meant by “guiding”, Emily responded: *In times of need, there was always someone to provide me with guidelines on how to deal with my problems. This is what I want to do for others as well. Working with children.* She went on to explain that she wanted to teach, nurture and “guide” children, who often are *hurt, bullied and vulnerable.*

Giving advice to and supporting people.

ii) weaknesses?

Very emotional and soft-hearted. (She considered soft-heartedness a weakness because others often tend to take advantage of one’s softness or even bully one.)
Sensitive.

2b. What are your special skills and talents?

Love to dance.

Performing for an audience.

Working with any kind of child.

2c. How do other people see you, for example, do they say, “She never despairs?”

Mostly as a fun, outgoing, confident person who is always there when needed.

2d.

i) What do you enjoy doing?

Leading individuals.

Helping anyone in any situation. (Words such as “guiding”, “available” and “helping” occur repeatedly.)

What don’t you enjoy doing?

Seeing sad or lonely children or children who have been abused. (Emily is keenly interested in “helping” children who are experiencing problems similar to those she experienced when she was young – thus actively mastering what she had passively suffered – Savickas 2006a; 2006b).

What do you value most (e.g. money, status, relationships, achievements)?

Achievements and relationships with others as well as to see the result of helping and being there for others and making individuals happy.

4a.

i) Whom did you admire or who were your role models when you were young? Why?

Singers and performers such as Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake as it has always been my dream to entertain others.

Who are your current role models? Why?

My previous psychologist, as she helped me and guided me out of my troubled times and that’s what I want to do for others, but also anyone working with children, for example my dance teacher as she assists in their growth as a person through growth. (This response is in line with data typically obtained from the three anecdotes technique. Again, the recurring theme is helping others and being there for others. Responding to the question,

“What is it about your childhood that had led to this interest?” Emily again explained that she believed that her “unhappy past” had equipped her to *help others who are going through the same troubles as I did.*

- 4b. Who or what has influenced you most so far?
Having God in my life as well as my current family and friends, as they have been there for me when I needed them the most.
5. What leadership positions did you hold during or after school?
Prefect, SRC member.
- 6a. What is your motto? (e.g. Unity is strength/Wisdom through experience)
I think of helping myself by helping others.
- 6b. What is your favourite quotation?
Everything happens for a reason.
- 7a. What are or were your favourite magazines, TV programmes and websites? Why?
TV programmes would be 90210, Flash Forward, The Mentalist as I can learn and sometimes relate to people’s thoughts and actions (“helping” and “guiding”). I also enjoy Animal Planet and National Geographic (theme: sensitivity).
- 7b. What is your favourite book? Why?
I don’t enjoy reading books but mostly like inspirational books as they help me to be a better, more confident and helpful person. (In an earlier response, Emily said that other people saw her as confident. Upon further questioning, Emily replied that although she was growing in confidence, she did not regard herself as “confident” although the situation was improving all the time.)
- 7c. What are your hobbies?
Dancing, performing, and to help out with community projects and nursery schools with children.
- 8a. What have been your three biggest successes so far?
Academic results.
Dancing awards.
Becoming a dancing teacher.
- 8b. What have been your three biggest failures so far?
Having to leave a school.
Not always doing my best in everything and losing good friends.
9. If you were asked to write your life story, what would be the title of your book?
The unpredictable life
headings of the various chapters?
Becoming me
Getting to know
Loving and leaving
Passions and dreams
New journey.
10. What were your three biggest challenges (problems) when you were younger, that is, before the age of eight? (In a discussion with Mark Savickas in 2009b, I clarified an

earlier research finding I had made, namely that this question in particular seemed to yield an accurate indication of a client's major life themes. The reason I used this question instead of the corresponding three anecdotes question (TAT), was simple – whereas it takes approximately 20 minutes to elicit a response to the three anecdotes question, it takes far less time to elicit a satisfactory response to the question I asked, which is also the penultimate question in the narrative supplement of the *CIP*.) In my experience, in group contexts, this question can be used successfully instead of the TAT.

Becoming confident (see previous comment) *and outgoing but also to keep friends for right reasons*. Upon further questioning, Emily replied: *I had a bad skin and was bullied and humiliated by other girls when I was young. This made my life a complete misery. I eventually left school and went to another school where I was accepted for who I was. The new teachers provided excellent guidance at this difficult time and helped me to deal with my sadness.*

11. Reflect on how you experienced the session.

a. What did you enjoy?

The helpfulness and directing of what to do and also being comfortable.

b. What did you not enjoy?

Having to choose between answers which I could both relate to.

c. Is there anything else about you that I need to know?

I love working with and helping people and want to see good, positive results and rewards from helping others.

These responses were later discussed with Emily who had little difficulty in identifying the themes and subthemes that emerged from her reflections on the reflections discussed above. Table 1 reveals a remarkable overlap between the two sets of data, and it was therefore fairly easy to link the themes identified by the *Career Interest Profile Narrative Supplement* with the career categories and careers Emily identified in the *Career Interest Profile*.

Table 1: Identified life themes and associated fields of study: Qualitative assessment

Theme identified	Associated field(s) of study/	Source of data: Qualitative	Source of data: Quantitative
A. Religious convictions a. Deep sense of religion b. Inspiring others c. Reaching out to disadvantaged, disempowered persons	Theology Social work	Career Interest Profile (Maree 2010c) Career Interest Profile Narrative Supplement (Maree 2010c) Client's reflections/ meta-reflections	Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank (RMIB) (Hall et al. 1986) Myers-Briggs Type Indicator(MBTI) (Briggs and Myers 1990)
B. People orientation a. Guiding and advising others b. Helping others grow and develop c. Supporting others d. Leading others	Teaching (Educational) Psychology Journalism Nursing Homeopathy Occupational therapy Communication pathology Human resources management Optometry (Hairdressing)		SAVII (Du Toit 1992) Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank (RMIB) (Hall et al. 1986) Myers-Briggs Type Indicator(MBTI) (Briggs and Myers 1990)
C. Sense of creativity a. Performing b. Acting c. Entertaining others	Hospitality management Drama		SAVII (Du Toit 1992) Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank (RMIB) (Hall et al. 1986)
D. Desire to achieve a. Academically b. In the field of entertainment	All fields above		
E. Aspiration to maintain good interpersonal relationships	All fields above		

Consistent with the counselling principles embodied in the career construction approach (upon which some of the questions in the narrative supplement of the *CIP* were based), the 11 questions in the *CIP* were used to elicit life themes. These themes were subsequently related to various fields of study with minimal intervention from the counsellor. Emily was repeatedly requested to make connections between her life themes and different working environments with a view to actualising these themes so she could enter into an appropriate occupation and also make a social contribution. I helped Emily realise the importance of looking back and reflecting (and meta-reflecting) on her thoughts and actions. I impressed upon her that she was the expert on her own life and that she would – while listening to me read her responses back to her with minimal interpretation from me – actually be listening to her own voice.

She could thus accept responsibility for her own decisions with the knowledge that she was free to make her own choices and that she was not subject to fate or circumstances beyond her control. Emily's individual experience, choice and agency were repeatedly emphasised, directly and indirectly: whenever she asked for advice, I discreetly read back her responses to her to meta-reflect on. Emily's uniqueness and irreplaceability were also accentuated as were her capacity and longing to realize her full potential. Lastly, and most importantly, Emily was continually reminded of her inalienable right and privilege to reflect on and transcend her (perceived) limitations and to turn her weaknesses into strengths.

DISCUSSION

Emily's response to the first question in the *Narrative Supplement* of the *CIP* provides useful clues on how she intends to realise her life themes (i.e. by 'guiding, advising and helping others'; 'being there for others', 'caring for others', and 'nurturing others'). Emily, who was facing a crossroad (leaving school and having to decide on a field of study/career), drew reflectively upon her autobiography to strengthen her sense of self and keep her story ongoing. On being asked to reflect on her response to the tenth question (above), for instance, she realised that her early experiences had fundamentally influenced the direction of her life. She said that, as a very young child, she was extremely shy and struggled to make friends and maintain relationships with others. She often lost friends after a short while because of her lack of self-confidence, and she eventually began to make friends with people whose values differed widely from hers, resulting in a deep sense of disappointment and causing 'grief' to her parents. Emily's meta-reflections enabled her to identify her main life themes and also possible 'vehicles' that could help her realise these themes. This would facilitate the integration of the different facets of Emily's personality.

It became clear that guided meta-reflection offers a theoretical framework for explaining the career behaviour, career choices and career development of an adolescent who seeks 'career counselling'. It also became clear that this approach offers a viable counselling model and methods of assessment and intervention to help adolescents meta-reflect on their life stories in such a way that they can become the architects of their own lives: *Id est.*, construct, design and actually live successful lives. Since the subjective meanings Emily attached to her reflections and meta-reflections proved central to her life designing (of which career-related choices were only one facet), career counselling in her case became social co-construction of meaning by her (Blustein, Palladino Schulteiss and Flum 2004).

The qualitative techniques used in the study augmented the quantitative techniques and vice versa. The present research indicates how contemporary theories and goals in career counselling, including the historical and philosophical underpinnings of qualitative as well as quantitative approaches, can be merged to provide a viable framework for the interpretation and explanation of career-related

behaviour. Above all, it seems that the approach outlined here can be used to promote meta-(self-)reflection for life design and living a successful life (Duarte 2010; Maree 2010d; Savickas et al. 2009) and offers a useful strategy to help clients face repeated transitions as and when they occur.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section several recommendations for theory and practice are discussed. Firstly, psychologists-in-training should be encouraged to study this theoretical framework, which combines ideas from the different theoretical approaches described earlier and consider the viability of the proposed practical strategy. Secondly, the viability of the approach should be explored in group contexts since it is often not practically possible to conduct qualitative assessments in such contexts (Maree and Molepo 2007). Thirdly, psychologists should be encouraged to build on the findings of this study, which provides evidence for the merits of a meta-reflective approach to (career) counselling in facilitating a deeper experience by clients of the value of listening carefully to themselves and thereby discovering ‘truths’ about themselves and advising themselves on how to deal with repeated transitions when confronted with crossroads in their lives. Psychologists should accordingly network and conduct research in this field and report on their findings in scholarly journals and at conferences.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations in this study. Although steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, the subjective interpretation of the data by the author could be viewed as a limitation. Likewise, the client’s idiosyncratic socio-economic background, language barriers and the absence of a blind scorer of psychometric tests could also be regarded as limitations. Another limitation is that I only had a day to see the client which led to a very long session; this could potentially have impacted on the results.

CONCLUSION

Emily is now – 24 months after the process described here – well on her way to becoming a teacher (eventually aiming to become an educational psychologist) and meeting her inner convictions, needs and wishes by responding to the main themes that were identified. Although she is doing well in her chosen field of study (education, including psychology modules to enable her to specialise in educational psychology at postgraduate level), she realises that this is not an end in itself but rather a means to actualise the main themes in her life. By following her own advice derived from her reflection and guided meta-reflection, her chances of living a successful life and making a social contribution seem greatly enhanced. She is better equipped now to confront the complexities of her life and appears highly motivated to realise

her ultimate life goals, which are inextricably linked to her identified life themes. The meta-reflective conversations based on her career narratives have apparently contributed to her heightened self-insight into her experiences and perceptions.

I hope to have shown that the narrativ approach to career counselling elaborated on in this article can transcend the weaknesses associated with traditional approaches to career counselling. Furthermore, I hope I have provided some evidence that the approach advocated in this article (a meta-reflective paradigm) is suitable for use in the South African context, as is demonstrated in my exposition of Emily's case study. At a conceptual level, I hope I have shown the meta-reflective approach is convincingly enough presented as an approach constitutive of reflection and narrativism vis-a-vis the main meanings of meta-reflection.

Ultimately, for our clients and for us as career counsellors, the ultimate purpose of career counselling is to turn the experience of receiving career counselling into what it was for Epston, namely 'the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve [offering] the possibility of a new beginning' (O'Hanlon 1994, 3). Guided meta-reflection may provide a useful strategy to achieve this aim. Now seems the right time to shift the emphasis from advising clients on what is most suitable and 'right' for them towards encouraging them to reflect on their narratives under the guidance of a skilled career counsellor.

NOTES

- 1 Some authors prefer the term social constructivism.
- 2 I accept that many factors other than career counselling impact on people being excluded from tertiary education or losing interest in what they have enrolled for. The intention is not to suggest that this challenge relates only to people who have never received career counselling.
- 3 A pseudonym is used in the case study.

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