Creating Career Stories through Reflection:
An Application of the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development

Mary McMahon* and Wendy Patton
School of Learning and Professional Studies, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
and
Mark Watson, Department of Psychology, University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Abstract

The Systems Theory Framework (STF) of career development represents a metatheoretical account of career development that is consistent with the constructivist worldview. Presented as a framework of influences, the STF clearly illustrates the content and process of career development. The STF has provided the stimulus for the development of a qualitative career assessment process, a guided reflection titled My System of Career Influences (MSCI) (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). Using the content subsystems as aspects in a process of guided reflection, clients engage in the construction of their own career stories by reflecting on their system of career influences. Reflection on the meaning of these influences is guided by a series of questions. The MSCI reflection activity may be completed individually, in groups, or with the assistance of a career counsellor or career teacher. The development and trialling of the MSCI will be outlined in this paper.
To this end greater emphasis is being placed on the relationship in career counselling and the co-construction of meaning.

While assessment remains a widely accepted feature of career counselling (Chartrand & Walsh, 2001), the traditional “test and tell” assessment method is less acceptable in a climate where meaning making is perceived as a desirable outcome of the counselling process. Indeed, Savickas (1993) suggests that career counselling needs to become less expert dominated, less focused on fit, and more focused on stories than scores. To this end he suggests that “acting as co-authors and editors … counsellors can help clients
1. authorize their careers by narrating a coherent, continuous, and credible story,
2. invest career with meaning by identifying themes and tensions in the story line, and
3. learn the skills needed to perform the next episode in the story” (pp. 210 – 213).

The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development

The Systems Theory Framework of career development (STF; McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton & McMahon, 1999) represents a metatheoretical account of career development that is consistent with the constructivist worldview and calls for changes in the nature of career counselling. Presented as a framework of influences, the STF clearly illustrates the content and process of career development. Further, it provides a map that can guide career counselling and the co-construction of career stories. The term influence was deliberately chosen by the developers of the STF as a dynamic term capable of reflecting both content and process components of career theory. Content influences include intrapersonal variables such as personality, gender, abilities and age, and contextual variables which comprise social influences such as family and environmental/societal influences such as geographic location. These influences are represented in the framework as three interconnected systems – the individual system, the social system and the environmental/societal system.

The first of the process influences is the recursive interaction within the individual as well as between the individual and the context. The second of the process influences emphasises how recursive interaction contributes to the microprocess of career decision making and the macroprocess of change over time. The third of the process influences represented is chance. Importantly, the content and process influences are located in the context of time, to incorporate past, present and future considerations in clients’ career development. Patton and McMahon (1999) propose that at a given point in time individuals are able to represent visually the constellation of influences connecting with their career situation. In their presentation of the STF, Patton and McMahon outline the sequential development of the interconnections between the intrapersonal system, the social system, the environmental/societal system, and the influences of past, present, future and chance.

Qualitative Career Assessment

As suggested by Patton and McMahon (1999), the STF may be used as a qualitative career assessment tool. Qualitative career assessment is perhaps best described as “informal forms of assessment” (Okocha, 1998, p. 151). Such assessment provides an opportunity for client and counsellor to co-construct a story around a qualitative assessment process that is flexible and collaborative rather than expert driven (Peavy, 1996). The use of qualitative assessment in career counselling suggests a process other than the traditional linear view of career counselling. The process informed by the constructivist worldview centres around story and meaning. It also emphasises the importance of the counsellor entering the client’s life space and developing a collaborative relationship with him/her in order that the client’s career story can be told, meaning explored, and new meaning co-constructed. Through this process, the next chapter of the client’s career story can be then written through their actions.

McMahon and Patton (2002b) proposed guidelines for incorporating qualitative career assessment such as the MSCI into career counselling. For example, they suggest that
counsellors need to consider a range of client and assessment issues. Client considerations include: entering the client’s world and acknowledging the client as an expert in that world, and exploring that world and the meaning the client has made of it. The client may have already engaged in self-assessment and thus the career counsellor would need to negotiate with the client as to the need for further assessment. Where further career assessment is agreed to, there is a second set of considerations to take into account. These are: selecting from a variety of assessment processes on the basis of the career story and needs of the client; involving clients actively in the assessment process; and incorporating assessment results into the process of meaning making. Further career action or plans are then negotiated between client and counsellor on the basis of co-constructed meaning.

The My System of Career Influences Reflection Activity

The STF has provided the stimulus for the development of a qualitative career assessment process, a guided reflection titled My System of Career Influences (MSCI) (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003a). As with many other qualitative assessment processes, the STF, and consequently the MSCI, is grounded broadly in constructivist theory. Using the content subsystems of the STF as aspects of a process of guided reflection, clients engage in the construction of their own system of career influences. Reflection on the meaning of these influences is guided by a series of questions. The MSCI was developed according to the guidelines suggested by McMahon, Patton, and Watson (2003b).

The development of the MSCI has been conducted in a three stage cross-national process. Stage 1 was based on the pilot version of the instrument (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2000) and involved groups of masters level students enrolled in career development courses in university settings in Australia and South Africa. Feedback from this first stage suggested that the MSCI was worthwhile for participants as they were able to meaningfully create their own career stories through reflection. Further, participants recommended that an adult and adolescent version be developed. Stage 2 was based on the adolescent version (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2003a) with a similar sample to that in Stage 1, most of whom worked with adolescents. Stage 3 was conducted in an individual setting with adolescents in South Africa.

The MSCI is a booklet of nine pages that guides participants through a reflection process on their current career situation that may be completed individually, in groups or with the assistance of a career counsellor or career teacher. Each page introduces a new aspect of reflection and provides participants with brief information, guided instructions, examples and a place to respond. Each aspect will now be briefly described. My present career situation consists of 7 open-ended questions inviting participants to reflect on elements of their career such as occupational aspiration, work experience, life roles, previous decision-making and support networks. The next three aspects of the reflection process, Thinking about who I am, Thinking about the people around me, and Thinking about society and environment, invites participants to reflect on a range of influences and select, detail and prioritise them. The following aspect of the reflection process, Thinking about my past, present and future, invites participants to reflect on past career influences, present circumstances, and anticipated lifestyle. Following this guided reflection process, participants are invited to diagrammatically represent the influences they have reflected on. A page titled Representing My System Of Career Influences and a chart titled My System Of Career Influences guide participants in this reflective process. A final process titled Reflecting on My System Of Career Influences invites participants to reflect on insights they have gained throughout the process and facilitates the telling of their career stories.

Applications

The MSCI reflection process may be self-guided. However, it is preferable that career counsellors or teachers interact with clients throughout the process and provide support and clarification where necessary. The MSCI also accommodates the time demands of different
settings. While the MSCI may be completed in a 30 minute session, a degree of flexibility is also possible. For example, it is possible for participants to complete discrete phases of the MSCI in their own time or to return to it several times. Further, participants could revisit their MSCI over time and modify aspects of their responses according to changes in their lives or new insights or awareness.

The MSCI lends itself to a variety of practical applications. For example, it may be incorporated into individual career counselling in several ways. It may be used as a stand-alone process or as a precursor to more extensive career counselling. Similar applications apply to group career counselling. In career education settings, facilitators may use the MSCI as a single lesson or embed it into a series of career education lessons. Where the MSCI is used in group settings, processes of interaction and sharing between participants can be facilitated. The use of the MSCI as an educational process may even be extended to career counsellor training. For example, students may be encouraged to reflect on their own system of influences in order to understand themselves better, to develop an understanding of holistic conceptions of career development, and consequently a greater sensitivity to client issues.

To date, the development of the MSCI has involved a rigorous process of theoretical, conceptual and practical refinements over a three year period. Feedback on the MSCI as an application of the STF indicates that clients are able to meaningfully create their own career stories through reflection. At the time of writing, the MSCI has reached its final stage of refinement prior to its publication and availability for public use.

References

**Authors**

**Dr Mary McMahon** manages a portfolio career that comprises lecturing at postgraduate level, writing, and research. She is particularly interested in constructivist approaches to career counselling and career assessment, and the career development of children.

**Professor Wendy Patton** is Head of School of the School of Learning and Professional Studies at Queensland University of Technology. She has lectured and written in the broad career development area for many years. Her current research interests include career development in adolescents, career change, and work and well-being.

**Professor Mark Watson** lectures in the Department of Psychology at the University of Port Elizabeth in South Africa. His research focuses on career lifespan issues, the contextualisation of career theory and instrumentation, and the career development of children.

**Theory and Practice**

This section is designed as a brief professional review of the article. It provides relevant study questions and answers for readers to test their knowledge of the article.

*In what ways does qualitative career assessment differ from more traditional assessment processes.*

**Answer:** Traditional career assessment implies a linear approach where the counsellor is the expert in the assessment process. Using a traditional approach, career assessment is likely to produce scores or codes which then guide predictions about the career choice process. Qualitative career assessment recognises clients as experts in their lives, places emphasis on the counselling relationship, and thus is more likely to engage client and counsellor in a collaborative assessment process that generates meaning and through which stories are co-constructed.

*What does the MSCI offer that is new for qualitative assessment?*

**Answer:** The MSCI is a guided reflection process that engages clients in different learning mediums including visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and verbal interactions. On the one hand, it is grounded in career development, constructivist, and assessment theory. On the other hand, it offers broad application to individuals and groups in career counselling, career education, and career counsellor training settings.

* To whom correspondence should be addressed at 7 Rossmoya Street Carindale Q 4152
  Corresponding author’s fax: 07 3398 5670  E-mail address: marylmcmahon@bigpond.com