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Symposium: Research on the Process of Narrative Career Counseling

Prompting reflection and learning in career construction counseling

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Abstract:

Adopting the overall framework provided for an international inquiry into career counseling interventions, this article reports on a qualitative study into the efficacy of a relatively new approach to practice in England. Using career construction interviews as the counseling intervention, research involving two adult participants was undertaken. Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) was used to explicate the perceptions and understandings of both the participants and the counselor in the process. Outcome analysis framed the approach used to making sense of the data collected. Two contrasting responses were immediately evident from participants in the counseling intervention: one positive and one negative. The use of the IPR process enabled an understanding of the value of a structured process of reflection. Overall, the approach used was found to be of value to both participants, but in different ways.

Key words: narrative approaches, career counseling; constructionist; qualitative research; case study, outcome analysis

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1. Introduction

The principle of public funding for career counseling and employment services in England, especially for young people, has been established through various iterations of legislation over decades (Peck, 2004). As with all publicly funded services, career counseling has become particularly vulnerable to spending cuts in times of labor market volatility, with the most recent period of global economic turbulence and austerity proving to be no exception (Roberts, 2013). Marshalling carefully constructed arguments that demonstrate the efficacy of careers support for clients, based on a sound evidence base of robust research, has become critical for safeguarding services for all clients in need but particularly those who can least afford to pay for access. Alongside the imperative for demonstrating the positive impact of services for clients beyond reasonable doubt, is the vital and urgent need for counseling professionals to stay abreast of the best and most innovative practices. One example relates to the integration of an understanding of context into career counseling. Despite increased acknowledgement of the importance of the social and economic context to the delivery of effective careers counseling services that are meaningful to clients across their lifespan (Blustein, 1997, 2015; Richardson, 2012; Richardson & Schaeffer, 2013), evidence for the successful integration of theoretically informed frameworks that foreground context are scarce. Where new approaches have been developed (e.g., Savickas et al. 2009), what seems to be lacking are clear, robust, accessible and detailed accounts of how, exactly, these new approaches have been integrated into practice generically, particularly those that demonstrate benefits to clients. Experimenting with new approaches in practice is always challenging. Compared with the need to secure the survival of services, theory, and research underpinning practice is always at risk of being marginalized (Reid & West, 2011).

In the UK, the professionalism of career counseling has come under significant pressure (Hughes, 2013; Mulvey, 2013), with questions about its positive impact raised by politicians and funders of careers support services. The recent failure of practitioners to

integrate new approaches into practice has been attributed to the ‘technicizing’ of the career counseling sector, through the introduction of work-based qualifications that have resulted in a reduction in scope for professionalizing practice (Reid & West, 2011, p. 398). This process has exerted particular pressure on career counselors, who now also need to develop and deploy the types of coping strategies required by their clients, including career resilience and career adaptability (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012), to facilitate the construction of different occupational identities. The merit and importance of crafting different identities by clients has been discussed in relation to new approaches for practice (e.g., McMahon & Watson, 2013). This has relevance to all client age groups who are entering or navigating volatile labor markets.

Brown and Bimrose (2014) have drawn attention to the complementarity of a threefold representation of key factors influencing learning and identity development at work. The first representation, learning as becoming, views learning as a process of identity development. The second way relates to learning and identity development occurring across four domains of development: relational, cognitive, practical and emotional. Learning may involve development in one or more of these four developmental domains. The third way that learning and identity development at work can be represented acknowledges how learning takes place in the context of opportunity structures within which individuals operate.

The research inquiry presented in this article contributes to the existing evidence base, relating specifically to the efficacy of a career constructionist approach to career support for adults in England. It complements the other practice based, international research studies reported in the symposium by using a case study approach. A small scale, multi-perspective exploration of the value of the career construction interview (Savickas, 2011) was undertaken with two adult participants. A key feature of this study was the way in which the views of the client and the counselor on the value of the career counseling approach were compared with the judgement of an independent expert witness or third party.

2. The career construction approach to career counselling

Supporting individuals as they construct their career identity suggests a purposeful activity that places career into a life, rather than assuming that life must fit into a career. The term career biography, an individual's career story, may be a more preferable term to career identity as it appears less fixed. The related concept of *biographicity* (Alheit, 1995) has been used by Savickas (2011) in thinking about how individuals construct a career future.

Biographicity can be thought of as the processes by which individuals reflect on new, and sometimes troubling, experiences, rethinking and absorbing them into their life story. A career construction approach for career counseling (and other narrative approaches) views the practitioner as someone who works 'alongside a client, to explore their life themes in order to build biographicity' (Reid, 2016, p. 106) for career construction. In recognizing that indecision, or what Cochran (1997) refers to as wavering, is often part of the process, the approach encourages biographic agency. It does this by reframing disruptions as transitions and turning points, highlighting the connection to the future that links with continuities from the past. New ideas, experiences and information can be built on existing knowledge in a way that has meaning for the individual: in other words, the client decides what is important, what to take forward and what can be left behind (Savickas, 2011).

The way an individual develops a career biography, or is constrained in the attempt, takes place in a social context, co-constructed with others. As discussed above, managing a career biography has become more unpredictable and uncertain, and has evolved into an expectation that the individual takes responsibility for their own career/work patterns. In many communities, within and beyond the UK, traditional structures of work across generations have been lost, due, in part, to globalization and neo-liberal economics. Biographical and narrative approaches in career counseling represent a move away from what was a dominant Western, scientific orientation of measuring traits, using objective

psychological testing and matching these to relatively stable occupations; towards a greater focus on more subjective understandings of the meaning career plays within a life in a particular context. Contextual understanding is important to avoid the slide into psychological approaches that place responsibility for career decision making on the individual, as if the individual is always in control of their own future (Reid & West, 2016). The clients that seek career counseling experience various degrees of agency, or self-determination, within the social, economic, historical and cultural structures that affect their particular life chances.

If it is accepted that constructing a career biography is learning work and in current times not static, then the individual learns about self in a process of becoming, sometimes as active agent and at other times within structural forces beyond their control. At times of career transition and turning points, individuals may question and be troubled by perceptions of what constitutes their sense of who they are: biographies can get disrupted and de-storied. At such career transition points they can experience disturbance, particularly when decisions that affect their future have to be made. There may be numerous factors to consider, thus the ability to make choices independently is affected by a range of social, economic circumstances and cultural expectations. From this viewpoint the methods and approaches for career counseling interventions cannot be based solely on a psychology of the individual from the “inside out”, as it were, the “outside in” must also be attended to: hence the argument here is for a more *psychosocial* understanding that places such constructivist approaches within a social context (Reid, 2016, p. 105).

3. Methodology

An imbalance exists in the field of vocational psychology between understandings derived from quantitative compared with qualitative research. Qualitative methods have been lauded as “more explanatory, experience-near and theory-building rather than the more

typical theory-driven approach to research” (Richardson, Black, & Iwaki, 2015, p. 238).

While the value of quantitative methods for advances in the field has been acknowledged (e.g., Savickas, 2001), others have warned of the gap in knowledge that has been created by persistent neglect of qualitative methodologies (Blustein, 2006) and advocate urgent discussion by the career community of why this is the case, with a view to addressing this issue (Stead, Perry, Munka, Bonnett, Shiban, & Care, 2011). The overall framework for the international research studies sought to redress this neglect of qualitative methodologies in the field, with the research questions specified by the overall study framing this investigation. These were: 1) What changed during the career intervention? 2) Which elements determined these changes? 3) How was reflexivity fostered and developed?

3.1 Outcome analysis

While the study reported herein has followed the overall framework for the international study, it has also drawn on an approach developed to analyze outcomes from an initial career counseling interventions over a five year period. Fifty adult clients were followed up every year from 2003 to 2008, after their initial career counseling intervention. The purpose of these follow up interviews was to evaluate the extent to which the career progression of the participants during that five year period reflected the agreed outcomes from the initial career intervention (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2008). The focus of this evaluation study broadly reflected the three research questions framing the current study: What changed as a result of the intervention? What determined these changes? And was reflexivity fostered and developed. In the five year longitudinal case study research (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes, & Orton, 2003), the perceptions of 50 adult clients relating to the usefulness of the initial career interventions were compared independently with the perceptions of the counselors who had delivered the interventions. These two sets of perceptions were then compared with those of an expert witness, who listened to an audio recording of the intervention independently. The systematic triangulation of data from three separate sources

provided insights to different aspects of the careers interventions that had been found useful by the clients, and those that had not been valued. The follow up interviews over time then explored these perceptions retrospectively.

For the current study, an adapted approach to this approach to outcome analysis was adopted, with constructivist career counseling (Savickas, 2011) used as the counseling intervention.

3.2 *Researchers*

Three senior, experienced researchers, employed at two different English universities, were involved in the study. Preparatory discussions were conducted by telephone and using e-mail. Three distinct research roles were assigned, reflecting particular expertise. One researcher conducted the two career counseling interventions face-to-face (the counselor). The second role assigned was to interview the participants after the counseling intervention, to capture their immediate reactions, then interview the counselor and participants separately within 48 hours, using interpersonal process recall or IPR (the interviewer). The third researcher assisted with data analysis, by providing a more distanced and objective perspective on the career intervention (the expert observer). All three researchers were experienced applied qualitative researchers in the area of career counseling. Both the counselor and the interviewer were qualified and highly experienced career practitioners and educators. All researchers were aware of the need for reflexivity and the issues of possible bias. Their expertise and experience addressed, in part, the need for trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, the need to establish credibility, or confidence in the truth and integrity of the findings; transferability, or showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts; dependability, that is, demonstrating that findings were consistent and could be repeated; and confirmability, so that a degree of neutrality was maintained and findings were shaped by participants rather than by researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

Ethical approval for the study was formally secured from one of the participating universities. The conduct of the research adopted the requirements stipulated, including those relating to confidentiality, informed consent, data storage, risk assessment, and available support (for the participant, if needed). Both participants received information sheets, detailing the study and consented to their data being used in publications. Confidentiality was protected.

3.3 *Sampling methodology and sample*

Adhering to the guidelines for the international research, two participants were recruited to the study. Both were white females who participated on a strictly voluntary basis, using snowballing sampling as a non-probability technique (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004), as it was important that participants in the study genuinely wanted, and needed, a career counseling interview. Both participants were white females experiencing mid-career change

Participant A, who we will call Debbie, had previously expressed a desire for a careers interview. She was approached with an invitation to participate, which she accepted. Debbie was a doctoral student, in the age range 50-55. Her highest qualification was a degree qualification. She had taken time out of the labor market to enhance her educational credentials by studying full time for a doctorate. Being about half way through her studies, she had begun to think about her future employment prospects. Debbie's presenting problem related to her desire to gain clarity about her possible future and specifically her potential future relationship to the labor market. She needed to find a way of re-entering the labor market in the not-too-distant future in a manner that enabled her to accommodate strong personal values and reconcile these with her responsibilities to partner and family. Her partner wanted her to take a job that was less demanding than those she had had in the past. She had no clear idea of what she might do, because she had "too many skills; too many possibilities." Thus, Debbie wanted to find an occupational focus that reflects her values – where she could "make a difference." She needs to contribute materially to her family

situation and wants “to experiment.” Nevertheless, achieving at least a measure of work-life-balance was paramount, to prevent burn out and ill health.

Once Debbie had agreed to join the study, she was asked if she knew anyone else in her networks who might need career support. Her first suggestion was approached and agreed to join the study. Participant B, Susan (again a pseudonym) was a university employee, in the age range 45-50. Her highest qualification was A levels (typical upper secondary school leaving qualification in England). At the time of the interview, she was employed as an administrator on a temporary contract. Facing imminent unemployment with the termination of this contract, she felt “stuck” and wanted help to think through options. As a “trailing spouse (in nearly all cases a trailing wife)” (Green, 2015, p. 17) she had made career sacrifices to follow her partner’s occupational progression and had consequently incurred a labor market penalty through having a fragmented career pathway, and being constrained to look for employment in the geographical location of her partner’s job. Susan’s presenting problem related to her desire to gain clarity about her possible futures and specifically her potential future relationship to the labor market. She was trying to reconcile an existing tension between her desire to find employment that was fulfilling, yet feeling she should conform to expectations that she expedite her job search by taking anything available. This would enable her to “get a foot in the door,” but she wanted to wait for a job with which she could identify. The constraints of gendered localization were operating as a particular barrier to her re-employment, with Green (2015) arguing: “It is the case that in comparison with men, women tend to face more spatial and temporal fixity constraints in negotiating paid work and other aspects of their lives” (p.22). For Susan, the desired outcome would comprise the identification of practical steps. She believed that she needed a plan, because she felt “out of control.” Above all, she wanted to be excited about her future job and feel committed.

3.4 *Procedure*

It is argued that in qualitative research, “how one listens, or the method that is used,

has much to do with what is heard” (Richardson, Black, & Iwaki, 2015, p. 238). The interview room had been prepared to ensure privacy and comfort, with participants arriving 15 minutes before their interviews to give time to settle in. Since interpersonal process recall (IPR) was subsequently used to explore perceptions of the intervention, a method of recording was required. Instead of using a video camera to record the interview (as recommended in Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008), which would have been expensive, cumbersome and intrusive, an iPad was used to video record the interviews. An audio recorder was also used as back up. The equipment was explained to participants and assurance sought that they felt comfortable. The two interventions were career construction interviews (Savickas, 2011) carried out by the counselor, who is both qualified and experienced, using a specially designed worksheet described in more detail in section 3.5 below (Savickas & Hartung, 2012). Each interview took approximately one hour to complete. After the interview, the counselor withdrew and was replaced by the interviewer, who explored with the client their perceptions of the most important thing that had happened. Responses were recorded and written notes were taken. In each case, this process took about 15 minutes. The interviewer then repeated the same procedure with the counselor, using the same prompt question.

3.5 *Interpersonal process recall (IPR)*

Within 48 hours of the intervention, the interviewer undertook IPR with both participants, then with the counselor, in line with the international study. Best practice in IPR interviewing was followed, as far as practically possible and desirable with two participants (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008). The recordings of the interviews were used to stimulate detailed exploration of the counseling process, and for reflection. The questions from the overall study structured the recall process: (a) What changed during the career intervention? (b) Which elements determined these changes? (c) How was reflexivity fostered and developed?

3.6 Model used in the career construction interview

Before moving to the data analysis, the model used for the career construction interview will be summarized. It is important to note that there are other models that may involve narrative or biographical approaches that can be grouped under a qualitative and constructivist epistemology. Recent edited collections on the range of constructivist approaches that have been evaluated in practice in a variety of settings are available; for example McMahon and Watson (2011, 2015) and Nota and Rossier (2015). In this research, the model was introduced to the participants as the career construction interview, derived from Savickas' (2011) career construction interview with some adaptations made for a UK setting. The model involves six initial exploratory questions around role models, favorite books and media, hobbies and interests, and finding a motto or favorite saying than can sum up an approach to life. The exploration continues by visiting early recollections from childhood to search for the client's perspective on the current transition. For further detail on the model, see Savickas (2011) or Reid (2016).

Savickas and Hartung (2012) have made available on-line the worksheet used in this research. The worksheet provides prompts for the questions that elicit responses that draw on the individual's narrative and their early recollections. The worksheet aids the practitioner in providing a structure for the interview, albeit this can be used flexibly. Brief notes are made and shared with the individual during the feedback phase of the interview, where the client reflects on the emerging patterns and possible themes. On completion of the session, the sheet is given to the client. A brief follow up contact, where action is considered following a period of reflection, is conducted shortly after the interview, usually within a few days and in this case by e-mail.

4. Analysis

The challenge of qualitative data analysis (QDA) remains "a thorny one" (Burnard, 1991, p. 465). Based on an interpretative philosophy, it involves a range of processes and

procedures that transform data into an explanation or enhanced understanding. In this study, participants' recollections of their career construction interview were analyzed qualitatively to examine the meaningful and symbolic content of the data. An attempt has been made to represent the experiences, feelings and reflections of the researchers, as well as the participants in a systematic, impartial, and honest manner.

Since the sample for this research study comprised two participants, a modified approach to analysis was adopted, drawing on Burnard's (1991) methodology. This is concerned with participants' responses as well as what may have been inferred or implied, involving coding and classifying data. It aims to make sense of the data collected to highlight important messages, features, or findings. A modified six-stage approach was adopted. For stage one, notes were made after each interview about topics talked about during the interview. The researcher interviewer also wrote memos (Field & Morse, 1985) about ways of categorizing the data, which enabled ideas and concepts that occurred to the researcher to be recorded. Stage two involved reading through the transcripts and noting general themes that emerged. This immersion in the data enabled the researcher to become familiar with the perspective of each participant as well as the interview process. In stage three, transcripts were read once more with codes and sub codes developed, providing headings and categories for organizing data. The list of codes was scrutinized again during phase four, with the purpose of rationalizing and reducing the number of categories, removing similar headings. Stage five involved the other two researchers (the counselor researcher and the expert observer) scrutinizing, critically, the coding system independently, having read the transcripts of the interview. The few differences were discussed until resolution was resolved. Stage six involved the writing up process, staying as close to the original material as possible, but identifying categories to help make sense of the data.

5. Results

The coding system conceptualized the participants' subjective reactions to a structured

exploration of their current career situation. Because the career construction interview was adhered to for both interventions, it was relatively straightforward to highlight similarities and differences in the participants' responses, by coding and mapping recurrent themes.

The major code category to emerge from the data relative to the present research on reflection and change during counseling was narrative exploration of self. It consisted of an exploration of significant recollections, and/or associations from the past. Emerging codes sought to represent the participants' guided exploration of episodes that were recalled, together with both their reflections and their attempts to make sense of these recollections. By exploring the behavior narrated, associated feelings, reactions to, and interpretations of the recollections, the participants' subjective experiences became the basis of making sense of the sometimes problematic reactions.

5.1 Narrative exploration of self

Within this major category, four sub-codes were identified: (a) awareness and reflexivity; (b) self-perception; (c) values; and (d) identity. Awareness and reflexivity refer to the participants' ability to identify their likes and dislikes, employment aspirations, perceived barriers, disposition, preferences, resistance and openness. Participant B, Susan, explained how she finds it "difficult to talk about myself and my feelings." Although largely resistant to the process of the career construction interview, she was able to reflect on how she could see patterns in her life story. She recognized that she engaged with recreational activities that helped her to "switch off," taking her out of herself. Participant A, Debbie, identified her propensity to overwork and the toll that this had taken in the past on her health, her well-being, and her family. While clear that this tendency needed to be reined in, she wrestled with her persistent tendency to go for "the big challenge" and make even simple jobs complicated.

The second sub-code, self-perception, relates to the contrasting views of self held by the two participants. For Susan, a poor career self-concept was exemplified by her

expressed belief that she had only a “mish-mash of skills,” with a lack of confidence that she would ever be able to find her ideal employment, coupled with a sense of loss for having lost her “perfect job” when she relocated to accommodate her spouse. Debbie demonstrates irrepressible optimism, with a belief in herself as hard working, capable, and with an almost bewildering range of choices.

The third sub-code, values, related to the participants’ core guiding principles. While both felt it was important for them to be able to feel that they were “making a difference,” Susan was fearful that she would not be able to “be brave and stick to my convictions,” even though her intuition was “nearly always right.” In wanting to make a difference, Debbie recognized that she needed to take more care of herself and redress imbalances that had occurred in previous job roles: “I’m a workaholic...I need to remember that I’ve got a life. I’ve had greedy jobs. I love work, love challenges and it’s just not good for you.”

Identity was the fourth sub code to emerge from the data of both participants. Susan felt that she lacked any identity: “I would like to say, “that’s who I am!” Lacking confidence and self-belief, she wanted to be able to trust her own intuition, yet there was a risk of her faltering in the face of other voices telling her “not to be so choosy.” Debbie understood that she was searching for a new identity. She had knowingly precipitated a major life transition by re-entering education full-time and was anxious about the future direction of her employment pathway, but was aware of options available and was thinking through implications for her identity: “There has to be a balance...if I go self- employed, my troubles would start...if I go for an easy job, then I make it hard...maybe with a portfolio orientation ...”

6. IPR Outcomes

Participant A, Debbie, found the intervention “valuable and thought provoking, very useful.” The counseling intervention had enabled her to be a “third person looking in at me”, finding the questions a “very useful thing to do.” This case is fairly straightforward

in that it conveys a clear case of the value of the career construction process, and how the feedback was insightful, useful, and perceived as relevant and very helpful. Debbie specified that the nature of the problem she brought to the career intervention related to her career break: “I’ve taken time out of the labor market to study and I have to work through what I am going to do next. It wakes me up at night...end of my first year and time is passing. I’m conscious of intersectional discrimination and will be facing the labor market with diminished opportunities. Sometimes wonder what I’m doing now. I’m [in my 50s] now – what am I doing? I have two kids incurring massive debts and a husband facing retirement.” The counselor helped her to be reflective about her past career: she had “always gone for the big jobs.” Jobs with the potential to make a difference in people’s lives, but then had experienced burn out. She reflects on her own advice to herself: “[I’m] telling myself to be wary. Learning to take care of myself.”

Her immediate response to the final question of the interview: “How has this been useful?” - was typically enthusiastic: “It’s been very useful I’m very present/ future orientated ... don’t think about the past and the factors influencing decisions. This has enabled me to understand internal factors. Very interesting and useful. Now knowing about it, can be a third person looking in at me. Questions very useful thing to do.” During the IPR interview the following day Debbie remained very enthusiastic about the process: “Stories? In the process of selection, I thought about why and how it had been important. Could also see themes running through my stories. Found stuff that I didn’t know was there – amazing! The really powerful moment was the headline. When I had to provide that, I had to sort out the relevant issue. Quite a powerful experience - never had anything like that before.”

There is much laughter in the interview and it is evident that both the counselor and the interviewee are enjoying the process. However, it is a very serious moment when she gives the headline to the second recollection, “the really powerful moment”. It is an amusing story, but she looks sad and when this is reflected back to her she finds particular resonance

in the interpretation she places on the story told.

Counselor: OK. Your second story then, was upsetting your best friend, she was eighteen, you thought it was daft that she was getting married at eighteen. She asked you to be your bridesmaid and you were, reluctantly said yes because of the dressing up element, so you're in a full length "curtain", you talked about her mother who was perfect, you said that Carol had a draw full of silk handkerchiefs and you used toilet paper, but there you were in the church, doing the following the bride down the aisle, you felt a tug on the back of your dress, and you'd been to the loo beforehand and it was tucked up in your tights. Erm, what would that be?

Debbie: 'Don't do it Carol'

Counselor: Don't do it Carol?

Debbie: Hmm

Counselor: OK, er you look, you look actually quite sad and it was an amusing story, but in the...

Debbie: Hmm yeah I thought it was the worst, she was, she was, she was, I didn't like her boyfriend much

Counselor: Right

Debbie: And she was, yes has, from my point of view she was, she had so much potential.

Counselor: Right.

Debbie: She, she was a real, a real mathematical wiz, she could do maths and she was she was seen in school as someone who could go anywhere with maths. I mean Oxbridge maths, erm and and I knew that the boyfriend she was about to marry, he'd failed his GCSE's and he hadn't gone on to sixth form and he was working as a mechanic at a local garage and I knew that she would have to dumb down. I couldn't bear it and I didn't want her to do it. So much of it was don't do it Carol, and I don't think that I

deliberately sabotaged it by doing that (*laughter*), but the fact that I had to wear that dress and we were playing a game and we had to walk in form, but actually somebody should have been saying 'don't do it Carol'.

This is a key moment in the career construction interview that Debbie identifies in the IPR interview the next day. As the extract illustrates she becomes introspective and begins her own interpretation of the story. As indicated above it expresses powerfully her values, her need for independence and for a strong career identity, free from external constraints or social and gendered expectations. There are links with her role models, her reading interests alongside her need for experimenting with new challenges, also reflected in the other early recollections and their headlines. For her this appears to be *the turning point in the interview* when the meaning becomes clear. There is a growing awareness of where the questions and the story telling are taking her in her thinking. Connections are being made with regard to her own sense making of the emerging patterns and important life themes. These are the stories she needed to hear at this point in time, they are, to use the language of Savickas (2011), reflecting her *pre-occupations* and help her to identify the issues that she wants to address in her current career situation. Her advice to herself as a result of engaging in the career construction interview, relates to the tension between acknowledging her drive for intense and challenging work with the need to pay attention to work-life balance. After a longer period of reflection, she repeats this central theme in the follow up e-mail, some weeks later.

The case above illustrates that the process can be a powerful means of learning and development when the individual is able to commit fully and can see clearly what the process is intended to achieve. However, for that reason it is useful to examine the other case where Participant B, Susan, finds the career counseling process unsettling and is quite disconcerted by the whole approach. Recall that Debbie had requested counseling while Susan was recruited for the study. Both Participants volunteered and we did our best to determine that both genuinely wanted, and needed, a career counseling interview. However,

the difference between Debbie requesting and Susan being recruited may be worth noting here. Susan found the interview experience negative: “I haven’t enjoyed this at all,” although not entirely without value, as she could see patterns emerging in her life. She wanted to explore more and recognized that she tended to focus on practical solutions to immediate problems, rather than using a different lens.

The interview seemed to intensify her loss of identity. Previously, she had been employed as a manager within a large department of an organization, but had resigned to follow her husband’s occupational relocation. Her previous job carried a great deal of responsibility – it was strategic, managerial – involving systems and procedures, as well as staff recruitment. She became upset at the start of the career counseling interview and again in the IPR interview the following day: “I don’t want to lose skills – I have a mish/mash of skills And I do like a challenge.” She did indeed have quite a strong mix of skills, but working in administration meant she did not have a strong knowledge base or occupational identity to fall back on. She is dependent upon the organizational setting to provide a context in which the full range of her skills can be utilized. However, it is hard for her to get work that affords sufficient challenge to lead to further skill development and a sense of achievement. She was explicit: “I would like to have an identity – through my work.” And: “I want to achieve something. I want to contribute and feel I’ve made a difference.” Susan told stories that emphasized how she finds transitions difficult: for example, on changing from primary to secondary school, she reported: “I cried my eyes out – didn’t like it at all – it [secondary] was such a contrast to cozy primary. Verging on homesick – everything seemed very strange”. Her favorite book was chosen because it had a “thoughtful observer, wry, not deterred, quite forceful,” conveying perhaps a sense of slight detachment from events. She acknowledges: “I find it very difficult to talk about myself and my feelings. I tend to focus on the practical, solving/fixing.” Following her partner in his job relocation was a practical solution, but it gives her later problems as she does not find it “easy to make a transition to

other work.”

The session with the interviewer immediately highlighted her unease: “I prefer to be reflective/ analytical ... I do want to be able to say: “this is my profession.” I was hoping I would be logical, practical, rational.” Using the frame of Brown and Bimrose (2014) it would appear that both her emotional development and reflexivity are under-played: “I don’t look at myself. Don’t consider my feelings when looking for work. I need to consider this more... my life story – I need to remember that this [episode] is one part of a bigger picture. Need to follow this through, but just don’t have time at the moment. Lack confidence in myself.” However, by the time of the IRP interview the next day, she had recovered somewhat from the unexpected nature of the approach and valued: “Being given space and acceptance.” She said she found the counseling intervention helpful, though not in the way she had expected, but found the IPR interview, with space to reflect and review “very useful.”

Her stories appeared to contain examples of unresolved loss, of finding safety, and then losing it. The interview process did allow for emotional processing and the interviewer reflected in her IPR interview later that she was “clearly very emotional – she seemed raw.” Changes occurring in the interview related to her emotional state, rather than cognitive aspects. She mentioned a recent disagreement relating to the need to find a job quickly. She spoke of an unhappy time and hinted at a negative influence in her younger years, which she did not wish to discuss. She talked about her parents’ divorce and “home sickness” was mentioned more than once in the recollections. In the IRP *interview there was a recognition that she cannot just focus on the rational, that her feelings were also important.* So at one level, she seemed in a better place to seek work, but she does have a continuing challenge in that her skills and strengths become visible through the process of working rather than appearing strong in the process of job-seeking.

Motulsky (2010) argues that career counseling should include a consideration of relational concerns, especially where relationships play a key role in career decision making.

The relational aspect to career decision making meant that her career narrative was disrupted. Following loss of her “dream job”, she found temporary work where the return of the post-holder meant that, again, she found it difficult to establish a progressive narrative rather than a reactive one. Her lack of a distinct professional qualification or a strong occupational identity means her well-developed cognitive skills are under-represented with regard to formal recognition of abilities, like, for example, problem-solving and critical thinking. Her practical (and management) skills in carrying out work tasks are very strong, but she now finds herself in something of a dilemma in that she desires a challenging work setting where she feels she can make a difference, to demonstrate these strengths, but she is unsure she will find a job that meets her needs.

In terms of the career construction interview, the contrast with the enjoyable interaction in the previous case is marked. In this case, the interviewee, Susan, felt she was being forced to choose, to pinpoint role models, a film, a book and so on and she speaks of wanting to disrupt the process, but she does not do this, she just “wants to get it over with.” There is also upset, at the start, following the question where the counselor asks how they can be useful as she thinks about her career. The counselor provides a holding space for the emotions that emerge, but there is a resistance to full engagement as the interviewee is protecting herself, raising psychological defenses.

The extract below from the career construction interview with Susan highlights the importance of explaining the form the career construction interview will take. Although time was spent explaining the processes for the interview and the follow up research conversations, the client was not as well prepared as she needed to be. For the counselor this is a learning point and the success of the interview was questioned with the researcher in the evaluation interview that takes place immediately following the interaction. The abridged transcript illustrates how the counselor hears the need for a concrete plan but focuses instead on the client’s response that “it would be nice to approach it in a different way”. This may

have been the result of containing the upset the client was expressing about her lack of a career identity, but clarifying further what the career construction interview could and could not do at this early point in the interview, may have lessened the frustration she expressed in the immediate follow up interview.

Counselor: How do you think I can be useful to you as you think about your career?

Susan: Practical steps. Is there a plan I can form? Trying to second guess – trying to adapt to get what I want, but feel it's the luck of the draw.

Counselor: Am I right in thinking that you want a plan before you start looking?

Susan: Doing administration over the years, I've got to know what I like and what I don't. Would like to find myself specializing more. In Universities, you can work on the teaching side or the research side. If you can do this, you feel that you have a place.

Counselor: (Summary) Seems that you want a permanent place where you can use your skills – something fulfilling?

Susan: Don't want to lose skills – I have a mish/mash of skills And I do like a challenge. [becomes tearful].

Counselor: It's alrighttake as much time as you need to

Susan: I would like to have an identity – through my work.

Counselor: Paid work is important to you...

Susan: I do have to work.....but I don't have to work to be fulfilled. It's more personal. I want to achieve something. I want to contribute and feel I've made a difference. ...

Counselor: So it sounds like you want a different lens – who am I and who do I want to be.....you need to think about what **you** want to do. The approach can be helpful in thinking about alternatives.

Susan: Would be nice to approach it in a different way – would be nice.

Counselor: And you said that people asking you what you want to do – puts you under pressure.

Susan: Yes – colleagues, friends and family at home...

Although career counseling may have therapeutic effects, this was not therapeutic counseling and the counselor does not attempt to cross boundaries or challenge her defenses. Furthermore, a session of one-hour was not long enough to process the emotions that crested during the interview. That said, although the process may not have been enjoyable, the interviewee saw value in the approach in that it may have strengthened a resolve to follow her own advice – to do what she wanted in terms of meaningful work and to resist the pressure to do what others told her. It was some weeks before she replied to the e-mail follow up, but she indicated, although now not in work she was not rushing to take just any job advertised.

Considering the different reactions of Debbie and Susan, highlights the amount of time needed for counseling. Typically, career construction counseling consists of two sessions. The first session constructs the career story using the six interview questions to prompt micro-narratives. The second session reconstructs the micro-narratives into a biographical macro-narrative that is then used to address the issues brought to counseling and make action plans. Based on follow-up, a third session may be conducted about a month later. For clients such as Debbie, the first two sessions may be combined into a one-hour session. However, with clients such as Susan, two separate sessions are needed to allow the client more time to process emotions. For Susan the IPR interview conducted within 48 hours did allow an opportunity for processing her emotions. Given that attention to feelings is greater during counseling than during vocational guidance, most clients can benefit from two sessions.

6. Conclusion

Adopting a case study methodology for this investigation, together with qualitative analysis, has provided rich and deep insights to the issues under investigation. Using career

construction interventions, it has been possible to illuminate what changed during the [career] intervention; which elements determined these changes; and how reflexivity was fostered and developed. The career construction interview stimulated reflexivity by requiring both participants to consider issues that may not seem immediately relevant to career exploration. The IPR process, subsequently conducted, similarly structured opportunities for review and reflection. Through the process of reflexivity, the participants were able to identify what had changed for them, as a result of the intervention and which elements had determined these changes. The contrast between the two participants, one of whom reported a wholly positive response to the intervention and the other a strong initial negative response (subsequently qualified) provides considerable breadth of understanding to the value of this approach. Irrespective of the nature of the participant response, both were able to identify ways in which they had benefitted.

In times of rapid change across global labor markets and the current restricted resources for career guidance and counseling services in many countries, the career construction interview might be viewed as too time consuming. To be effective, it requires rapport building and a willingness to take time and to move away from the apparent certainties of a formulaic, pragmatic approach based on matching personality traits to occupational factors. However, this case study research has shown how the time invested was worthwhile. It is doubtful whether, on its own, a reductionist trait/ factor approach would have been useful to either interviewee in this research. Career choice has become an increasingly complex business for individuals and taking time to build meaningful relationships with clients is at odds with the dominant neo-liberal culture of targets and tick box practice, so evident in the quest for efficiency in a context of work intensification. It is argued here that to meet the needs of clients, innovative, creative and reflexive approaches appear to be more relevant to current socio-economic and cultural realities. However, paying attention to context is vital, in order to avoid over-psychologized approaches that

neglect wider constraints; whether we are talking here about the client and their future career construction or the counselor and their professional desire to be useful to the individuals who seek their help. Change is inevitable, with the professionalism of the careers sector worth protecting. This article, sitting within the broader symposium, reports a study of practice based on a narrative approach to career counseling that vindicates its worth and value to clients. It illustrates the difference between vocational guidance based on scores and career counseling based on stories. Moreover, it has provided evidence of the efficacy of this approach with adult clients, and has used a qualitative methodology, so neglected by the field.

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