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Negotiating professional and personal biographies in a liquid world: creating space for reflexive innovation in career counselling

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Abstract

This paper explores the constraints to innovative, creative and reflexive careers counselling in an uncertain neo-liberal world. We draw on previously reported research into practitioners' use of a narrative model for career counselling interviews in England and a Europe-wide auto/biographical narrative study of non-traditional learners in universities. The latter draws on a number of narrative interviews with an asylum seeker, to debate whether such a way of working with people, 'in a clinical style', offers contextualised insight into people's struggles to construct a career and a methodology for doing so. The paper also examines the difficulties of creating a 'good enough' professional, psychosocial space for experimentation with creative approaches in a marketised guidance world, where more is expected from less.

Key words: career development; auto/biographical; narrative career counselling; creativity; reflexivity; psychosocial

Introduction

In previous papers we reported on collaborative work with career guidance practitioners, designed to develop, chronicle and evaluate the use of narrative career counselling methods derived from the work of Mark Savickas. We explored practitioners' struggles to learn, reflexively, from experience, as they 'risked' engaging with new methods to enhance their practice at a time when the manualisation/standardisation of practice, and a focus on relatively crude outcome measures and 'efficiencies', have become the norm (Reid & West 2011a, 2011b).These concerns echo anxieties in many professional fields in the United Kingdom, such as social work (Munro, 2011). 'Manualisation' has come to predominate, which can include rigid adherence to designated procedures and a lack of creativity, accompanied by anxiety about getting things wrong as well as limited time for clients: rather than working more creatively, over time, and exercising nuanced judgement in a developing human relationship. In this paper we engage with a wider debate on how to re-invigorate new kinds of career counselling professionalism as well as considering the

implications for training and continuing professional development. At the centre of any attempt to re-invigorate professionalism, we believe, lie basic questions of the epistemology, ontology and methodology of practice in a world where professionals have to cope with the contradiction of politically imposed standards, targets and 'efficiency' pressures alongside the frequently intense needs of those who contact them in precarious situations. Standards, targets and efficiency are part of a neo-liberal discourse that derive from the premise that professionals are not to be trusted to deliver good and efficient services without the discipline of strong competition and clear accountability, using measurable outcomes such as entry into the labour market or education and training. We suggest that a professional reinvigoration could include understanding the potential role of auto/biographical narrative methods in illuminating and helping people find direction in lives; accompanied by more of a *psychosocial* interpretative repertoire, informed by psychoanalysis, narrative psychology and critical theory. This in contrast to a still dominant, narrower and overly individualistic psychology, with its neglect of the semantics of human experience in specific cultural contexts (Bainbridge & West, 2012). The space for experiment, however, can be limited.

This current paper draws on previously reported research to extend the debate and draws on the work of critical theorist Axel Honneth (1995a, 1995b, 2007, 2009). This offers a new theoretical lens for career counselling, explored through the story of an asylum seeker called Matthew. We hope to encourage practitioners and educators of practitioners to move away from a reliance on traditional ways of 'doing careers work', and for thinking about it, toward more interpersonal, relational, reflexive and contextual methods and understandings, even when this conflicts with organisational pressures.

Contextual background to the paper

Our starting point is an in-depth auto/biographical narrative study of a number of career guidance professionals and their clients in England during 2008 – 2010 (Reid & West, 2011a, 2011b). Many of the tensions illuminated in that study may resonate with colleagues working in career guidance and counselling in other countries. However contextual differences matter, so we should briefly explain the condition of career guidance and counselling in England, as a basis for better appreciating the constraints inhibiting creative practice. Some constraints have been illuminated in depth by the reflexive stories practitioners told about attempts to innovate and work in more client-centred ways. There are also boundary issues between guidance and therapeutic counselling, and questions as to

whether career guidance practitioners are fully prepared (in England and elsewhere, or 'educated enough', in terms that we explain) to work effectively and confidently in an increasingly complex, liquid world.

We illustrate the point through a case study of an asylum seeker in the UK, and consider the methods of auto/biographical narrative interviewing as a way to inform career guidance and counselling practice. The case may be extreme – in the extent of dislocation – but it raises basic issues about careers work and its values in conditions of economic fragility and mass migration: the latter viewed as constituting a major crisis in contemporary Europe. We summarise some of the psychosocial and cultural barriers to professional creativity, reflexivity and more fulsome engagement with the other. And we return to the importance of narrative career counselling for both practitioners and clients, in processing troubling experience and managing endemic uncertainty; and for building, however problematic, a career biography in what Bauman calls a liquid world (Bauman, 2000). There may in fact be a profound contradiction between the need to take time with clients to build meaningful relationships and to cultivate reflexivity, via storytelling, and the ubiquitous 'neo-liberal' environment of targets, manualisation of practice, discourses of efficiency and work intensification; a place in which time, especially, has been colonised. To repeat, by neo-liberal we mean the pervasive discourse that markets best guarantee good provision because they bring healthy competition and providers who are responsive to 'customers' if only to ensure survival; and where performance is often measured by speed of 'throughput'.

To return to our context, Watts (2010, 2013) has written extensively about the erosion of career services for young people in England. He has summarised recent failed attempts to restore a quality service and the implications of this. In brief, from the year 2000, careers advisers became 'personal advisers' and many were unqualified in career guidance but trained, in the main, through work-based National Vocational Qualifications, in generic support work (not Advice, Guidance or Counselling). The changes led to the de-professionalisation, no less, of career guidance in England, as advisers previously specialising in careers work were asked to work in holistic ways; the effect, in the context of other changes, was to diminish their professional status and specialism (Lewin & Colley, 2011).

Additionally, there have been extensive cuts to funding, leading to redundancies and the dismembering of services across England. Career services to secondary schools (ages 11-16) are no longer 'free' and increasingly many schools (also coping with resource constraints) are unwilling to pay for an external service. The status of careers work within

schools has been marginalised and many schools' commitment to career learning and development is weak. Moreover, the 'privatisation' of many career guidance services has led to a highly target-focused form of provision. Here time and relationship can be regulated by a check-list mentality and pressure to move people into jobs or education, however unsuitable, unsustainable, short-term or ethically questionable (as with zero hours contracts). The professional role of career counsellors, in a zero contract, low-skill, unstable and even exploitative economy, comes into sharp relief. All of which is set in a context of high unemployment across the EU, with youth unemployment peaking at 19.2 million in the second quarter of 2103 (Eurostat, 2015). In the time frame of our study with career guidance practitioners (2008 – 2010), services were obliged to offer targeted support to prevent 'at risk' young people becoming NEET (**n**ot in **e**ducation, **e**mployment or **t**raining). During this period, eight practitioners participated in our research (reported in Reid & West, 2011a), which they viewed as a welcome space to reflect on practice, to learn about 'new' approaches and also to think about their own struggles in frenetic workplace environments.

The CEO of the regional careers service for young people (called Connexions) was contacted and the proposed research was discussed. A commitment was given that participants would be able to attend three whole day sessions with the researchers and to trial a new approach with clients. It was agreed that an email could be sent to career guidance practitioners inviting them to contact one of the authors if they wished to participate. Seven practitioners contacted us and joined the research. The eighth participant was undertaking a Masters programme with the university, whilst working as a careers adviser in a university in another part of Southern England. Ethical approval for the research had already been gained via our university and participants received an information sheet and were able to ask questions before giving informed consent. On completion of the study, two participants disseminated their learning to the company on an organisational training day and by other informal means (e.g. advice to colleagues on using the approach). The context, then, is a certain place, in a particular country, at a specific time; notwithstanding, there are themes that may resonate with career services elsewhere; where people are similarly affected by economic decline and or recession, efficiency imperatives and a focus on 'get them a job, any job'. The themes discussed will also resonate with professionals working in diverse public services, including those working with vulnerable children and families (Munro, 2011).

There is a further contextual issue: what is offered in any 'mainstream' service in England, i.e. in public services, cannot meaningfully be called career counselling; it is more

instrumental, having to do with information, advice and guidance (Reid & West, 2011a, 2011b). Moreover, what is offered tends to be grounded in 20th century theory and practice (Bimrose, 2009); and is less likely to draw on interpretative, constructivist or critical psychological approaches that constitute career counselling; albeit these approaches are included in University training programmes. This may be the reason why most practitioners in England do not refer to themselves as career counsellors, alongside the anxiety about crossing boundaries into 'therapy', for which they are not qualified. It should be noted here that careers services differ in each of the home nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), although the point could be applied across the UK. Our argument is that working in a 'clinical style', as explained below, needs to be central to career counselling. Career counselling often involves working in border country between advice, support and therapy and even at times crossing into therapeutic territory if in an appropriate and ethical way. In other words, concern about the term career counselling may be connected to a lack of adequate training and education for professionals, in some sectors, rather than the needs of clients struggling to cope with unstable labour markets and their social and personal consequences.

The narrative career construction model represents a deeply interpersonal, reflexive process: it is more complex than information giving, advice or job preparation; and drawing on the work of Donald Winnicott (1971) it takes place in what we term a transitional space for self-negotiation (Reid & West, 2011a, 2011b), Put another way, it is not about career planning, which can suggest a relatively stable employment market, but about working alongside the client to identify (co-construct) meaningful career projects, within a wider notion of life/career and potential agency. Savickas states (2011, p.8) 'Career counseling, from the project perspective of individual design, views clients as authors who may be characterised by autobiographical stories and who may be helped to reflect on life themes with which to construct their stories'. However, we are also sensitive to the charge that such a perspective risks reinforcing overly individualistic responses to the crises of a neo-liberal world: many problems, especially in marginalised communities, are more structural such as the distribution of opportunities, inequality and poverty, alongside the absence of jobs (Roberts, 2013). Markets alone, contrary to the pervasive tenets of neo-liberalism, cannot provide all the answers, nor can career counsellors (Sultana, 2011). Indeed, part of the present 'dystopia' might be the result of the ideologically normalising grip of neo-liberalism, in which individuals should be able to cope, alongside a corresponding marginalisation of ideas of collective action and provision, as notions of the public realm

narrow (Honneth, 2009; Marquand, 2004). The notion of collective action can be applied to the work of career counsellors: by, for instance, helping people create local exchange trading systems in distressed areas, or enabling others, such as retirees, to support and mentor individuals and introduce them to a range of potentially useful networks. Career counsellors could train and support people in this kind of advocacy work (Guichard personal communication, date 2014). Interestingly, the story of the asylum seeker, below, broadens the idea of career itself, including finding political agency through experiences of support, advocacy and recognition.

Creativity and purpose in meeting the requirements of clients - whose career counselling needs, we suggest, increasingly transcend information and advice - requires, in short, more nuanced and developed career counselling models that draw on constructivist, narrative, but also critical and reflexive approaches. This has to do with cultivating 'cultural' as well as personal and psychological sensibilities – what we term 'psychosocial' – in professionals. In what follows, we explore this using a case study of 'Mathew' (all names are pseudonyms), who was a 'non-traditional' learner in higher education. The question posed is what enabled him to 'keep on keeping on' in disorientating experience and to compose some direction; and what might be the links between good career counselling and the auto/biographical narrative research methodology used in the study? (Merrill & West, 2009; Bainbridge & West, 2012).

Matthew's story: a case in point

The case study comes from research among non-traditional learners in universities, financed by the European Union Lifelong Learning Fund[i] (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg, 2013). One of us, West, was centrally involved in chronicling the experiences of non-traditional students in a number of newer and older universities. The study involved seven countries and used in-depth auto/biographical narrative interviews, over three years, with samples of students in elite, or older institutions, and in newer universities, to illuminate what enabled people to keep on keeping on to forge more confident identities and 'learning careers'. The auto/biographical narrative approach used by the team based in South East England was described as working in 'a clinical style'. This is about being sensitive to the emotional and unconscious dynamics of human interaction, including what is difficult or maybe impossible to say and the researcher's role in creating a good enough, containing space for open forms of storytelling and reflexivity as well as potential action (West, Fleming & Finnegan, 2013).

Mathew's story is of profound dislocation, vulnerability, struggle and resilience in which the availability of particular resources – space in the university and auto/biographical narrative research - made a real difference to his life and career trajectory. Our basic point is that these elements can help us compose new and better models of careers counselling. The research design is close to Savickas' emphasis on storytelling and cultivating shared reflexivity. Moreover, the research has generated an interdisciplinary theoretical repertoire for thinking about the conditions for human flourishing, in particular using the psychosocial theory of recognition derived from Honneth's work (Honneth, 2007; West, Fleming & Finnegan, 2013; West, 2014).

'Mathew' could have sought help from a career guidance practitioner or support worker, but chose not to. This was mainly a result of who was available, and particular teachers in an Access to Higher Education programme offering considerable emotional support and advocacy, over time; but it was also because the research project itself created particular qualities of narrative and reflexive space that would have been difficult to find in a conventional guidance setting. What Mathew did find were human and emotional resources in the attentiveness of the teachers and in the auto/biographical researchers (West, et al., 2013). In fact, in-depth longitudinal research fulfilled a number of what we might label career counselling functions, including space for reflexivity. Mathew, as noted, was an asylum seeker and fled from a violent war zone. He lived in a kind of border country between different cultures. He struggled to survive in spaces that were never truly his own or safe. A first interview was dominated by the process of asylum seeking and the insecurity and anxiety this brought. The need to feel legitimate in the eyes of authority figures, represented, among others, by the interviewers, was also strong and at the core of the first interview.

Members of Mathew's family had been killed in a civil war and he fled to Britain. Place, material resources, but also acceptance and security mattered. The space represented by the auto/biographical narrative interviews might have been threatening – somewhere to prove his worth – but it developed, over time, into a relatively secure space in which he could negotiate around who he was and potential ways forward. There were four auto/biographical interviews over a period of three years, while email contact was regular, including towards the end of the study where advice and help were given with aspects of essay writing, and with what might underlie his reluctance to seek help. The contact was regular but not excessive when thinking about how this might apply to the work of careers counsellors.

Mathew told stories of racism in the part of London where he lived, in the first interview, as well as of an 'accident': of failing to complete a first year programme at a particular 'elite' university and feeling cut adrift. He searched in vain for a personal tutor and for support in that university, but felt none was available. His material could be considered an encounter with an unfamiliar, unconducive habitus, to use Bourdieu's (1988) term, where he barely understood the rules and rituals of an elite cultural space (West et al., 2013). He was forced to withdraw but entered an Access to Higher Education programme and found support from two teachers at a local further education college. They were like parents to him:

> Well when I was in college, I used to go to court [courts of law to process asylum application] to have interviews. They knew something was going wrong … they knew I was very committed to school and when I was not coming to college one day they knew something was happening… They said if you have any problem you can talk to us.

The teachers wrote a letter of support and employed a lawyer to help with his application for asylum. This gave Matthew greater confidence to tell his story to them, 'I mean the first thing about self-exposure is about confidence. They were like parents to me'.

Mathew became a part-time student on a course at a newer, multicultural university, where he felt more at home. He was working all hours to survive and still needing to prove himself to the world. As a student, this was difficult; by the second interview he told stories of struggling with assignments. Mathew found it hard to seek help, needing to prove himself as a man, father and husband. He helped others, but was 'not so good at helping self', he said. But over the course of the project he became an advocate for other minority students at the university and was politically active in the community on the relationship between poverty, racism and mental health issues. The narrative process was important to him in weaving meaning from the diverse fragments of experience and for defining a future career, working for others less privileged in relation to mental health. In Honneth's terms (2007) the research interviews offered basic experiences of recognition – of attentiveness, respect and time – which are fundamental to self-confidence. Later, Mathew said of the four research interviews, undertaken over three years:

> Well actually, the whole of this interview process you can see all the progress, looking back to where I started before you came in, before I entered College, I came in as an Asylum seeker, being advocated for by the lecturers. A year later I went to university, I had an accident there….I did not understand the system to satisfy my desire, my goal of helping poor people. That became a failure for me…. if you don't be somebody, you're nobody…..So I went through the process, I'm a British Citizen! Defend the interests of Britain. It is exciting because there are people struggling who

have been there for 15/20 years, throughout their life. They are not in the system. So I must count myself as an exceptional person... I want to make a connection where I can be appreciated, can just achieve my goals of helping the poor.

So how might such material connect with career counselling? We note various dynamics at work in the material, and the ideas of Honneth (2007; 2009), drawing on critical theory and psychoanalysis, are helpful. Developing an understanding of the dynamics of recognition - encompassing intimate, meso as well as wider societal levels – is pertinent. At an intimate level, recognition has to do with experiences of selfhood, and of finding good enough space to be creative without fear of rejection or never being good enough. Mathew was able to play with future possibilities, because he felt seen and recognised by important people. The second type of recognition is to do with self-respect, when a person belongs to a community of rights and is recognised as a legally mature person (Honneth, 1995a, 1995b). Recognition of the autonomous person, bearing rights in law, is the basis for meaningful self-respect. Mathew began to participate in the rituals of the institution - in committees, and in advocacy work for non-traditional students - and felt valued by others as well as being a 'proper student'. This is not about having a good opinion of self, but a sense of possessing a kind of shared dignity of persons as morally responsible agents and as capable of participating in public deliberations.

The experience of being honoured by a community for contributions leads to the third form of self-relation which Honneth terms self-esteem. People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other's contribution to the community from which social solidarity can grow (Honneth, 2007). Mathew became an activist within the university but also the wider community, using his knowledge of diverse cultures to advocate on health care and to critically interrogate dominant assumptions. In fact he was using the auto/biographical narrative research to test out his career experiment and to feel more legitimate and recognised in the process (West et al., 2013; West, 2014). Yet, there is more to it: the experience of feeling listened to and understood, being given time and attention, and being able to talk, more or less openly, about difficult material, was crucial. At the heart of these processes are particular qualities of good enough relationship, where anxiety is contained and a person can play, narratively, with new possibilities, in processes of self-negotiation. Matthew is an example of constructing a positive career future from a past negative experience. Savickas describes this, thus, 'People convert symptom into strength through actively mastering what they passively suffered' (2011, p. 33).

Significantly, perhaps, Mathew forged a strong relationship with one of the interviewers – a woman – and he talked openly about his problems in seeking help or feeling vulnerable as a man. Processes of recognition are not simple and linear, as Honneth might suggest (West, 2014). A person may move backwards and forwards in experiences of self as new problems present themselves in a recursive process. This found specific expression in relation to writing, which towards the end of the process remained a significant problem. He was persuaded to seek help from a learning and support centre at the university, but the researchers also helped, as noted, with his writing and made suggestions for assignments. He said he felt understood and supported and sent subsequent email messages telling of his progress and of the importance of the research. Such research is profoundly relational and we need to think about the particular qualities of the interaction. Clearly this is research in a kind of border country (Hunt and West, 2012) between research and therapy, and between the role of conventional researcher and acting humanely and ethically by helping with immediate problems. Sustained reflexivity became essential, however, and attention had to be paid to the workings of power and unconscious processes in which the other, the researcher, can be crucial to what can be said and done, negatively and positively. Questions were raised throughout the research as to the extent to which the quality of the relationship enabled, or not, someone like Mathew to claim space and find empowering forms of recognition (West, et al., 2013).

The need for a paradigm shift

Stories like Mathew's suggest some of the qualities that may be crucial to good career counselling as well as narrative research. There is recognition in the UK of the need for a new paradigm (Bimrose, 2009). Bimrose concludes that the matching model devised in the early 20th century remains dominant: despite its flaws for contemporary careers work in a world where jobs for life and clear career pathways have dissipated. Likewise, the case for a paradigm shift is argued in the USA and across continental Europe. This was the premise of the European/American research group formed to develop the 'Life designing' approach (Savickas et al., 2009). In developing this, the research group recognised that although there may be some danger of discounting the contribution of 20th century theories and models of implementation, these approaches are often not fit for purpose. In increasingly vulnerable economies, under the impact of financial crises, globalisation and austerity, radical new thinking is required about career and its management.

It is important to stress that the Life designing paper is *not* offering a 'model' or singular approach for working with clients. This would be counterintuitive to the philosophy behind the development of an approach based in social constructionism, which pays attention to individual, relational and contextual influences. But it is rethinking the epistemology of career. However, we are aware that paradigms and theories, if viewed as overly complex, will be ignored rather than engaged with by practitioners, particularly where they operate within time constraints where the norm is one relatively short session. Indeed it is the 'common sense' simplicity of the trait/factor model that has kept it alive for over a hundred years – with its alluring and 'objective' appeal for policy makers and service funders. Yet, the need for serious rethinking is also pervasive. The Life Designing Report of 2009 was a positional paper which recognised the complex issues around terminology and the difficulties for innovation to occur, collectively, 'on the ground'. One example of a desire to embrace innovation collectively is the EU supported Erasmus Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe (NICE), bringing together colleagues from over 45 higher education institutions in 25 countries to work on innovative practices for career counselling. The work of NICE is published in a handbook that emphasises the need for the *academic* training for career guidance and counselling professionals (Schiersmann, Ertelt, Katsarov, Mulvey, Reid & Weber, 2012); in order that practitioners are sufficiently educated for the challenges they face. This of course begs the question of what 'academic' might mean and the specific contribution of universities in such a project. This is not to ignore the tensions that exist between university-based education and work-based learning for the profession, or the contraction of the former in England. As mentioned earlier, major cuts to funding have affected career services in the public sector and their ability to employ staff or finance training. What is emphasised is the need for quality training for career professionals that goes beyond a 'one size fits all' approach and includes a developed understanding of a range of approaches suitable for current and emerging circumstances. We suggest that an academic education also needs to encompass a clinical dimension as a basis for career counselling, alongside cultivating understanding of the epistemology of constructivist and psychosocial perspectives in a liquid world.

Constraints to innovation

All the practitioners valued the workshops (three days in all). The first two workshops provided a training opportunity for practitioners to try out the approach in a 'safe space' and the third offered a location to discuss their early 'experiments' using the

approach and to evaluate their experience. In a second phase of our study, we interrogated practitioner experience in-depth, and four out of the original eight practitioners recorded interviews with clients and reflected on using narrative career counselling (Reid & West, 2011b). This second phase of the research also provided, to some degree, a supervisory space for the practitioners to discuss the use of the model and the issues and successes experienced. There were problems among some of the group of career guidance practitioners that we worked with in thinking about and experimenting with auto/biographical narrative methods. Although interested and engaged in the early stages of the project, four of the eight withdrew, citing 'pressure of work' or 'a change in work role'.

Using auto/biographical narrative interviews and analysis, in which careful attention is paid to the relational and emotional dynamics of interviews, was similar to the clinical style of the RANLHE study above (West et al., 2013). We sought to explore the impact and constraints that career guidance practitioners experienced and the emotions generated: their stories shed light on difficulties and frustrations of innovating in professional contexts. All four practitioners' stories are 'telling' but we draw in particular on Zoe's story (Reid & West, 2011b), because of its power to illuminate important issues across all the cases. There were similar themes in all participants' narratives, but Zoe's material brought these to life in especially compelling ways. This is the telling story, or single case, like Mathew's, often used in auto/biographical narrative enquiry and in qualitative research more widely: where particulars are illuminated but in a manner that enables links to be made with macro and meso level dynamics. The macro level of neo-liberal ideology penetrated into the meso level of work environments and practices, in the form of targets and constraints on time, although agency was possible in the project and because of what was experienced as the facilitating presence of a university. Our approach to the analysis of the material is fully discussed elsewhere (Reid & West, 2011b; Reid & West, 2014). We include Zoe's case study here for three reasons: to highlight the constraints to innovation evident in current practice, to emphasise the potential of constructivist approaches and to advocate for 'safe' learning spaces to develop and evaluate appropriate and innovative methods.

Zoe's narrative

Zoe was an experienced career guidance practitioner who felt passionately about young people and encouraged colleagues to join the project. In her conversations with us there was a strong sense that her professional world discouraged creativity given the pressure to deliver clear and measurable outcomes. She indicated that space was constrained

for experiment with narrative based methods, in her world of competence-based training and the manualisation of practice. The geographical context in which Zoe operated is relevant, an area that has suffered from processes of de-industrialisation with fragile employment prospects, high levels of unemployment and poverty.

The experience of using narrative based approaches and the entire project evoked ambivalent feelings in Zoe. It was exciting, stimulating, but troubling and uncertain. She was committed to her work and the project, yet the relative open-endedness of the narrative method and the emotional and narrative uncertainties that could be involved – for both her and her clients - raised awkward questions. She described the constraint of the 'normal' model, i.e. having to 'tick boxes and follow a 12 point interview protocol' and how this closed down the space for innovation and creativity. Experimenting with a different kind of space, using a narrative approach, could be scary: raising questions about the training, role and expertise of the guidance worker. Zoe talked of the difficulty of being 'exposed in doing something that you're not comfortable with or confident with'. A first interview was 'fine' despite her concerns. However, another interview, with a deeply disturbed young woman, did not work so well. The client talked a great deal about difficult issues in a psychologically dissociated manner and Zoe made the decision not to continue with the narrative approach. And there was inadequate clinical supervision for Zoe to engage with and manage some of the feelings and thoughts engendered.

Zoe told us about how she attempted to introduce narrative methods in her role as a manager in a team building exercise on a staff development day. She used the simple device of 'tell me a story' with the staff, asking them to talk about an interest or passion as a way of mirroring good practice with clients. There was 'huge resistance' among some and accusations of being overly intrusive. In the feedback some colleagues insisted that private and work life should be kept separate. One implication was that bringing personal stories into work is overly intrusive or it presented challenges that were simply too much to take on. Or perhaps Zoe communicated her anxiety and the space, in Winnicott's language, was not 'good enough'. Yet Zoe yearned for a world of serious engagement with the issues of how to work creatively and professionally in an environment she thought of as 'deprofessionalised', which resonates with the findings of Lewin and Colley (2011). The project represented a hopeful space albeit a troubling one. For Zoe the basic difficulty had to do with an absence of professionalism and a learning, reflexive, creative, collegiate culture:

> I want to be working in a collegiate manner with my colleagues and us all being able to discuss things and work in this manner. The one sensation I do have is

there aren't many people within the organization that you can have those sorts of discussions with. It just wouldn't be something that would be possible; we don't share a language even, anymore.

What was clear was that Zoe strived to be creative – searching for learning spaces where meaningful practice might be developed and discussed – between colleagues and ultimately for the benefit of the young people. Sadly, she was not sanguine that her working context could provide such space or that many practitioners viewed this as desirable. But despite misgivings and anxieties, she viewed her engagement with the project as beneficial. Although Zoe used a narrative model selectively, aspects of the method were seen as transformative, because they had to do with building trust, rapport and recognition of the importance of being listened to and valued. The process encouraged career counselling not simply giving 'information, advice or guidance'.

The auto/biographical impact of using a narrative approach

In our analysis of content and process we discussed the particular element of Zoe's interview that related to the staff training day. We wondered about the story here, as told by Zoe. Her colleagues, we might speculate, were defending their personal lives, viewing work as increasingly intrusive. There is a possible split in which work can be seen, in its intensification, as colonising private space that in turn generates understandable resistance. But, of course, we simply do not know enough about the dynamic between Zoe and the group. We worked with the transcripts of all four practitioner/participants and there were commonalities with regard to the auto/biographical significance of the work (described in more detail in Reid & West, 2011b). For example, it became evident in the analysis of the four practitioners' transcripts that the approach leads to introspection and self-questioning. 'Jade' indicated that she felt 'out of her depth' at the start, as she was working in the project 'with very experienced people'. Jade was trained via a work-based National Vocational Qualification (although she was a graduate) and one of the reasons the research appealed was she felt that it could provide the theoretical friends that were lacking in the NVQ approach. Like the others, she was prepared to take a risk – although from her point of view one unsatisfactory narrative interview meant she did not continue to use the approach. What she would have liked was an opportunity to process what happened in supervision or other educational spaces but this was not available in her workplace.

So is the narrative approach too challenging – or is *any* new approach / way of thinking about and 'doing' career guidance too problematic in a manualised, target driven

culture? Education and training for a professionalisation more fitting to the contemporary needs of society have, as argued, to compete with the need for services to meet politically defined outcomes and professional standards. In England resources are restricted and further cuts to public spending are likely, which places an enormous burden on those delivering services and the tensions cannot be ignored. But there is room for manoeuvre in the cooperation and space provided by a university initiated research project, which can be replicated by similar collaborations, in other locations, in the search to revitalise and enhance a profession.

Moreover, a call for more interpretive approaches for career guidance is not new (Collin &Young, 1986). There is now an increasing international literature which can provide substantial texts for both trainee and experienced practitioners (McMahon & Patton, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2011; Savickas, 2011; Lent & Brown, 2013). Savickas and Hartung (2012) have made available a resource for career construction work which is available on-line. Beyond the conceptual paper of the Life designing group in 2009, Nota and Rosier (2015) have published an edited text that includes various international examples of approaches-in-practice. Further implementation however, will require greater recognition that interpretive, narrative approaches, grounded in social constructionism, require a fundamental shift in conceptualising the purpose, practice and values of career counselling – what it can achieve and how it should be resourced.

Negotiating a practitioner biography: what should career practitioners be educated for?

In terms of policy, Law (2011) states that individual professionalism requires institutional and policy support and that policy cannot have a positive impact without the commitment of the practitioner. He emphasises that that the meanings attributed to the work of career practitioners are contestable and not fixed. Careers work - who does it, with whom, where and how - needs to be examined in terms of relevance if it is to be a valued service. A study by Thomsen in Denmark (2012) challenged established ways of thinking about the 1-1 'delivery' of career guidance and counselling. Her work suggests that it is the community rather than the individual that should be the starting context in the process of career guidance. Such collective and communal practice can avert the tendency to assume individuals make career and educational 'decisions', divorced from their social context and how power circulates in society. Such 'self-criticism' of career guidance is difficult in uncertain times, but reform needs to take place if careers work is to be viewed as credible

and survive the current 'trauma' in England (Roberts, 2013) and similar constraints elsewhere.

It may be the case that distinctions between different types of career professionals become blurred. For instance career coaching is evident across many organisations, public and private, so there is a further question about who will be giving career guidance and counselling in the future (Reid, 2016) and how the current merged professional organisation in the UK (the Career Development Institute) will influence this. If career counsellors are to be part of the relevant service; i.e. the place where people go, the service that is valued by governments and policy makers (Law, 2011), then to do the job effectively they need to have a broad grounding in new forms of training, far beyond sterile 'tick box' lists of competences.

Cultural relevance and reflexivity

The psychological and cultural context necessitates greater emphasis being given to the semantics of experience, less to the grammar of human development. Traditional psychology (in Piaget's work for instance), has emphasised the rules of human action – in its aspiration to be 'scientific', yet has neglected the individual's experience of what happens to them, and the meanings they impute. Psychoanalysis and narrative psychology aspire to a more experientially derived, semantic epistemology (Bainbridge & West, 2012; Bruner, 1990).   More semantically attuned work involves a collaborative relationship with the client where decisions about what works best are negotiated with the individual. Storytelling is fundamental to a new praxis, where theory and practice are intimately intertwined, as is collaboration, emphasising the need to understand what the client finds culturally relevant in terms of practice. There are power issues too when we use terms such as 'helping' and 'client' that have to be addressed in a reflexive and critical approach to cultural relevance (Watson, 2013; Arulmani, 2014; Reid & West, 2014).

Constructing biographicity and a narrative identity

Paying attention to context is vital, in order to avoid the slide into over-psychologised approaches which neglect socio-cultural realities. Hence our focus on the need for more critical approaches that are sensitive to the social and economic forces that constrain, disrupt and destroy aspirations, beyond an individual's capacity to change. We need to be mindful of the very real circumstances that overwhelm lives. Narrative approaches encourage clients to explore their life themes but can be misunderstood and thought unrealistic, even illusory,

if done in a simplistic, insular 'just follow your dreams' model. Any over-individualised approach will fail in times of economic recession or constraint when the opportunities to pursue dreams are not available for many; or where practitioners are under pressure to deliver measurable outcomes. For example, the current employment opportunities for large numbers of young people across Europe remain dismal. Young people's stories in such circumstances are 'constructed' by the economic organisation of work, rather than their dreams, aspirations and capabilities (Sultana, 2014). Migrants like Matthew face massive barriers that 'matching' to abilities and personality traits gets nowhere near. Even so, what narrative approaches do in providing space to identify meaningful life themes, is help the individual to realise that there can be other possibilities for progress in a life and career.

So, in upholding the benefits of the theory of career construction and narrative career counselling, it is important to pay proper attention to the social, cultural and economic context. Reality must play its part, once the interests and themes have been explored in using a narrative approach. Beyond intention, the reality test is in the action taken and evaluated (Savickas, 2011), and in narrative career counselling this would be explored in a follow-up encounter, which does not have to be a face-to-face interview. Too often in career guidance the space for exploration is limited, indecision is seen as a bad thing, rather than a desirable space for reflection and consideration. Savickas (2011) elaborates career construction theory's model of adaptability, where what may be unrealistic choices or barriers to implementing a choice can be explored further, using a range of collaborative strategies. And like Bimrose and Hearne (2012), we are mindful that career adaptability is not just for clients and have advocated for transitional spaces for practitioners to negotiate their career biographies and enhance professionalism in uncertain times.

A further misunderstanding might be that narrative approaches are for the advantaged, articulate and 'mature' client, but there is more than one way to tell a story - to use narrative in career counselling, aside from the 1-1 interview (Nota & Rosier, 2015); including using the creative arts (Lengelle and Meijers, 2014; Reid, 2016). The practitioners in our project experimented in using the narrative career counselling model with some success, among young people in different social and economic contexts, with varying educational levels and verbal attainment. Success was achieved by our practitioners in interviews of 45 to 60 minutes, with a brief follow-up contact.

In essence, narrative career counselling encourages biographical agency and has the potential to help clients to 'articulate their intentions' as it 'clarifies the current choices to be

made and enhances the ability to decide' (Savickas, 2011, p.131), potentially finding pathways to a career future.

Conclusion

Drawing on these different research studies, our core argument is that the education of career practitioners needs to involve more than instrumentalist 'guidance'. If we are serious about social justice and ethics in careers work (Irving & Malik, 2005), training and practice should include building critical and reflexive ability to provide good enough space to listen to, hear and think about the stories being told. The stories that emerge may be from a different cultural context, where the practitioner has to be open to the individual telling their story within their own frame of meaning – for (in the widest sense) multicultural narratives. In the West, we have also to recognise that we may be culturally stuck, unaware of the cultural and economic, 'employment market' discourses through which clients' stories are filtered. Mathew, for example, struggled with negative tales of asylum seekers and 'scroungers'. He had, at times, made himself ill by seeking to provide for his family (getting up early taking them to and collecting from school) and working part-time as well as being a student in a university, as a way of resisting stigmatisation. But at times, it was a close run thing as his health suffered.

We have used the two case studies to support our argument against the growing manualisation of practice. In a liquid world, creativity, contextual awareness, criticality, self-knowledge and judgement in working with clients, are becoming more not less important, as is the capacity for experimentation with something like auto/biographical narrative methods and eclectic theoretical repertoires. Matthew's experience of auto/biographical research as, in effect, a career counselling space, illuminates issues of time, praxis and the management of contradictions, including the conflict between managerial and client-centred discourses. We have referred to Honneth and the need for understanding of the place of 'recognition' in human flourishing: working alongside people and their actual and often painful experiences whilst at the same time recognising what they manage to achieve in constructing a career, psychosocially. Note has also been made of how human flourishing depends on different levels of self-recognition: in intimate lives, in groups and in wider communities. The research underlines the importance of a good enough space to tell and develop stories, reflexively. In the context of mass migration and unstable labour markets, career counsellors will inevitably work with many 'Matthews'. Traditional

career guidance is no longer sufficient for the reality of such clients within the employment 'market' in an unstable world. The need for a paradigm shift is becoming more urgent.

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