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NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND STORYTELLING IN CAREER COUNSELLING

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Abstract*: It is recognized that counselling and career guidance can contribute to the maximum development of the professional potential of people in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, reducing academic dropout, an optimal transition of young people between different educational levels, increasing participation in education, developing social inclusion and equity in education or increasing employability by facilitating direct access. The scope of the present article is on narrative career counselling's contribution in offering a meaningful experience for people accessing career guidance services. In order to depict the potential of narrative career counselling, the storytelling approach is provided as a powerful technique for crafting client's self identities in contextually anchored ways.*

Keywords: *storytelling, career guidance, narrative identity*

Choosing a career and pursuing it does not represent an irreversible process that cannot be changed, but the correct choice of a career path and the existence of mechanisms that favour the development of all skills needed for the transition to the labour market, guaranteeing a good investment of time and other resources in the education of a person. In this respect, the existence of counselling and career guidance centres seems more than necessary for both individual benefits offered to people who use such services and societal benefits. It is recognized that counselling and career guidance can contribute to the maximum development of the professional potential of people in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, reducing academic dropout, an optimal transition of young people between different educational levels, increasing participation in education, developing social inclusion and equity in education or increasing employability by facilitating direct access.

Career counselling is a delimited process throughout a specialist provides support to another person (client) to overcome a number of obstacles related to the field of career, employment (unemployment, need to take an important decision, lack of job satisfaction, etc.) or related to personal life and affecting professional life (lack of organization, communication difficulties, inadequate time management skills etc).

The counseling consists of a series of face to face meetings during which discussions take place between client and counselor (interviews, filling out evaluation tests of interests, personality traits, attitudes, discussing results and simulating real situations etc.) in order to clarify the problematic situations that the client faces, and to identify possible solutions and support in adopting the most appropriate decision.

Career counselling most commonly addresses:

- better knowledge of own personal skills, abilities or knowledge;
- finding the optimal education and training path in line with real life contexts of personal projects and resources;
- identifying complementary alternatives to occupational structure of their interests, skills and dominant personality traits;
- shaping positive and realistic self image;
- identifying the causes, nature and extent of decisional barriers regarding occupations;
- maturing decisional autonomy of career development planning;
- compensating for lack of information, incomplete or misleading information and stereotypes about alleviating world of work;
- identifying sources of professional dissatisfaction, incompatibility or difficulty of social networking and assuming different roles.

As from the client's point of view, most individuals try to best cope when navigating their career development in a complex world of work context. Individuals access career guidance services as they seek answers to questions regarding past, present and future self identity. Clients are uncertain of all these identity tenses, and are situated in a constant search for a better understanding, controlling and predicting own identity.

The *main challenge* facing career counsellors in the process of seeking new ways of responding to the complex needs of diverse clients is considered in this article. Narrative career counselling has been widely viewed as the best approach to address this challenge as it offers the possibility of a new identity for the field and a sustainable and achievable future story (Savickas et al., 2009). The narrative career counselling paradigm has evolved into several approaches, including the story telling approach (McMahon, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2012). The focus of the present article is on narrative career counselling's contribution in offering a meaningful experience for people accessing career guidance services. In order to depict the potential of narrative career counselling, the storytelling approach is provided as a powerful technique for crafting client's self identities in contextually anchored ways.

Fundamental to narrative approaches is storytelling, which Cochran (2007) describes as a „human universal". In narrative approaches to career counselling, stories are elicited in different ways including the use of

qualitative career assessment instruments. Amundson (2003) describes the narrative career counselling process „active engagement". Amundson (2003) describes strategies such as the Pattern Identification Exercise to elicit themes common to the stories. The life design approach utilises a career style interview (Savickas, 2005) that comprises five questions to elicit stories from clients and subsequently their themes. In the story telling approach, the My System of Career Influences qualitative career assessment instrument may be used to elicit stories (McMahon, Watson, Chetty, & Hoelson, 2012a, 2012b).

1. Basic principles in storytelling

Telling stories is one of the most natural human activities. Consciously or not, we build, listen and narrate stories every day. Naturally, storytelling has become one of the favourite ways of communication, simply because it is effective.

People no longer seek simply sending a message, but engaging the public (audience) in a long-term relationship with the brand, no matter what that brand is (a product, a service, own self). But the consumer is bombarded with promotions and involvement attempts in all sorts of actions; it becomes less responsive to promotional material, developing a sort of immunity to the standard structure of advertising discourse and becoming more reluctant to credibility and usefulness of information coming from brands.

But the stories do not respect this structure, which revolves around brands and they are trying to persuade the audience to buy, test, click, like, share or hire. Stories leave the realm of demagoguery and hypocrisy, inviting the audience on a journey that will be at least as interesting, exciting, strange or funny, as they wish to be, thus satisfying a certain need.

If well written stories add an emotional dimension to communication, they generate sympathy and help "readers" much easier to retain information. Furthermore, the information submitted by stories becomes much easier to share with other people. To translate the values and mission of a brand into a story seems a simple thing to do, but not every story is captivating; to create a story that is enjoyable and memorable it takes hard work and talent.

Whatever form it will take, whether it is a video, a text or an oral communication, there are some rules and principles universally valid. One of them, learned from early school, clearly defining moments is subject. In 1863, Gustav Freytag, developed a model based upon Aristotle's theory of tragedy. This is now called "Freytag's pyramid" which divides a drama into five parts, and provides function to each part. These essential components of any message that will take the form of stories are: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. The inciting incident represents the event or decision that triggers a story's problem/dilemma. Before this moment there is equilibrium, a relative peace that the characters in a story have grown

accustomed to. This incisive moment, or *plot point* occurs and upsets the balance of things. Suddenly there is a problem to be solved.

As stories are about problem solving, sometimes they are solved, other times, they aren't. Regardless of outcome, this inciting incident starts the action by introducing an inequity into the lives of the characters that inhabit the story.

These plot points naturally split a story into four parts mainly because for every problem there are ***four basic contexts*** from which one can design the way to solve a problem. Once explored all four contexts, the story is over, any continuation would simply be a rehash of something that has already been happened.

Paradoxically, stories about brands must not have as main character the brand itself. The reason why stories are so popular is that no matter the subject, the reader makes the story about itself, identifying with the character, or with a more abstract entity such as a value, a belief or attitude. A well-written story, which has in the foreground an unwise chosen character, will undoubtedly be an ineffective story. From the perspective of promotional messages, a bad character means a character that falls into the category of those with whom the audience does not identifies with, or represents some ideals not to follow.

Once understood what problems the audience faces, what expectations and attitudes towards certain social phenomena, one can effectively build on these pillars a story, so it will be very easy for audience to identify with.

Every story has a moral, a parable or a final perspective that needs to be transmitted. A story that does not generate a change in attitude, perception or behaviour is one that has not reached its goal. Moreover, when it comes to promotional messages, the story is only the means by which information is conveyed. Analogies and comparisons are used especially when the information that wants to be promoted is new and foreign to audience or difficult to accept. Making the analogy between this information and another, to which the receptors already have a firm or a positive attitude, it creates a perception and meaning transfer between the two.

Probably the most common rhetorical trick in promotion messages, is typically used when the audience is cautious, rigid or when the message regards a social nature cause. The appeal to emotions and empathy harnesses the power of social pressure put on the audience in order to accept the message. Using humour attracts the goodwill of audience towards the message, and has the power to create exclusive groups, which include only those people who appreciate a certain kind of humour.

There is also a risk that the method of "packing" messages in stories is not efficient, because of how it is implemented or the context in which it is

used. Stories are not suitable for any promotional objectives, for instance, sales objectives aim at promoting a more direct approach. Storytelling is effective for brand targets, to attract attention, awareness, and public goodwill. A story full of clichés will normally be seen as false, and the receiver will feel like being cheated or even worse, that the message sender is underestimating their critical sense and the ability to discern.

Therefore, any kind of promotional messages in the form of stories represents a good way to attract public attention and cause them to react in a certain way. But to achieve these results, the story must be authentic, inspired by the audiences' life or current concerns and have built a good message, such as when reading, seeing or listening to the end, the connection between the brand and the content of the story must be clear.

2. Storytelling in career development

A key concept in nowadays personality psychology is narrative identity, referring to an individual internalized, evolving and integrative story of the self. The stories individuals develop to make meaning out of their existence serve to situate them within the social and modern adulthood (McAdams, 2008). It is within the realm of narrative identity, therefore, that personality shows it's most important and intricate relations to culture and society (McAdams, 2006).

Career interventions paradigm means general pattern of practice that includes many specific examples. Paradigm for vocational guidance is to (a) improve knowledge about itself, (b) increase occupational information, and (c) to match self with occupation specific substantiations of this conceptual model including person-environment fit approach advocated by Holland (1997) and Lofquist and Dawis (1991). Paradigm for career education is to (a) evaluate the status of development, (b) directs the individual to imminent development tasks, and (c) develop attitudes and skills needed to master those tasks. Specific examples of this conceptual model and its emphasis placed on learning can be found in instances known as career development and counseling assessment (Niles, 2001 Super, 1983), integrative life planning (Hansen, 1997), social-cognitive framework for choosing and career counseling (Brown & Lent, 1996) and learning theory of career counseling (Krumboltz, 1996).

Examples that invoke general conceptual model include the style of career assessment and counseling (Savickas, 1993), narrative career counseling (Cochran, 1997), constructivist career counseling (Peavy, 1998), career building by targeted actions (Young and Valach, 2004), My System of Career Influences (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2005), My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2007), Discovery of Occupational Activities and Personal Plans

(Guichard, et. al. 2012), the realization of metaphors (Amundson, 2010) and chaos theory of career counseling (Pryor & Bright, 2011).

All these specific instances of life design paradigm share the same life purpose: to prompt activities aim to further self-designing, to shape identity, and career building (Savickas, 2011). Each method uses autobiographical stories that lead clients through their ambiguity by creating scenarios linking future initiatives of past achievements. Each client is the author of a biography which may express their personal truths and authorizes an identity that projects the client into the future.

Thus, the stories clients build up to make sense of their lives are fundamentally about their struggle to reconcile who they imagine they are, with who they are and they might be in the complex social contexts; the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity (McAdams, 2008). Through the telling of stories, underlying themes emerge that permeate past and present stories and provide a scaffold for a future story (McMahon & Watson, 2013).

In career guidance, crafting a future story and a future identity must take account of the stories clients have told, thus the future story will be grounded in the stories of past and present experiences (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2011, 2012; White, 2007), experiences which are culturally constructed (Cohen, 2006).

When telling their stories and the crafting of future stories individuals engage in a reflective learning process (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Krumboltz (1996) claimed that the mail role of career counsellors is „to generate learning experiences for their clients", suggesting career counsellors to be less concerned about whether their clients were making decisions and more focused on whether their clients were learning, emphasiseing the process rather than the outcome of career counselling.

The story telling approach to narrative career counselling (McMahon, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2010, 2012) is grounded in the Systems Theory Framework (STF; McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006) of career development. STF describes the complexity of individuals' lives through dynamic, recursively connected individual, social and environmental-societal systems of influence. The basic assumption is that these systems of influences are located within the context of time, past experiences influencing the present lives of individuals and, together, past and present experiences influence the future of the individual. The systems of the STF represent the content of stories and also the sites within which stories have been constructed by individuals over time, being dynamic in nature. These dynamics reflecte in its process constructs of recursiveness, change over time and chance, all of which account for changes and interaction within and between the systems of influence over time (McAdams, 2008).

The core aspect of these systems is represented by the interdependence of their parts, relationship between the whole, its parts, and its environment; interaction rather than linear causes-and-effects (Collin, 2006). Thus, STF provides a map for the career counsellers (McMahon & Patton, 2006) that facilitates exploration of the "complex web of relationships … the complex interactions that take place, and so highlighting crucial influences and tensions" (Collin, 2006) in clients' stories.

The constructs of process, learning and reflection are central to the STF and also to the story telling approach. Theoretical concepts like connectedness, meaning making and agency are fundamental to the story telling approach. Connectedness reflects the dynamic systemic underpinning of the story telling approach and the recursive interaction that occurs within and between individuals' systems of influence. Meaning making occurs as individuals recount their stories in order to make sense of their experiences, as in the case of career counselling. Agency reflects a belief that individuals have taken an active role in the construction of their stories, their ability to tell stories and also to enact future stories (McAdams, 2008).

As for learning and reflection (McMahon et al., 2012a), the STF conceptualises career counselling as a learning system in which counselling is regarded as a learning process, career counsellors as learning facilitators and individuals as lifelong learners striving to make sense of their life experiences. Thus learning becomes a dialogical and cognitive process (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) as well as a transformative process (McMahon et al., 2012a) that is brought about through reflection. For instance, the recursive processes of connectedness, meaning making, reflection, learning and agency result in transformation as individuals arrive at a different end point or a new understanding of the same end point (McMahon et al., 2012a). During the dialogical process in the story telling approach, individuals tell stories of their experiences and, by reflecting on those experiences at both objective and subjective levels, transformation occurs, informing the construction of their future stories (McAdams, 2008).

Nevertheless, stories told by individuals are not created in a social vacuum (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002). Similarly, the emergence of narrative approaches such as story telling has not been created in a vacuum. McAdams (2008) clearly stated that part of the challenge for career counselling field has been the need to reconsider career guidance theory and practice that is more sensitive to the needs of non-dominant groups and that takes into account the broader sociopolitical location of individuals' stories (Stead & Watson, 2006; Watson, 2009), stories being embedded in the narrative disscourse of families, communities and societies (Combs & Freedman, 1994). Thus, career stories reflect the cultures in which they are constructed and told (McAdams, 2006).

3. Conclusion

Narrative career counselling has emerged as a viable future response to career counselling client's complex needs. This article presents theoretical and practical arguments for narrative career counselling's contribution, through storytelling, in providing a meaningful experience for career counselling clients.

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