

Career Counselling with Community College Students: Applicability of a Narrative Approach

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Abstract

Due to changes in the economy and therefore in the workplace, increasing numbers of students are attending community colleges. The applicability of traditional career counselling models for today's students is questioned, and a narrative approach is proposed as uniquely situated to complement and enhance existing practices. Many narrative interventions, such as the writing of therapeutic documents and the identification of "guides," mimic the community college culture, with its homework assignments and program advisors. Use of metaphor is a helpful tool for work with many types of clients represented at community colleges such as young adults and those from other cultures, and the strengths-based nature of this approach can help reduce acculturative stress. Lastly, the holistic examination afforded by a narrative approach can help illuminate potential internal or external client factors that may impact career decision-making.

The face of work is evolving due to a number of factors that have been termed "the perfect storm" (Jarvis & Sandowski, 2010, p. 1) which is proposed to include the current economic downturn, an aging population, and the "up-skilling"

of jobs, requiring the job-seeker to upgrade or change careers at an unprecedented rate. Consequently, the meaning of "career" has dramatically changed in the past 20 years and increasing numbers of individuals are seeking the assistance of career counsellors with this transition (Luzzo, 2000). Savikas (2013) notes that the two meta-competencies needed by 21st century jobseekers are adaptability and identity. Since an estimated 80% of all jobs in Canada require some form of post-secondary training (Jarvis & Sandowski, 2010), and considering the prohibitive time and cost of many traditional four-year university programs, it is estimated that an increasing number of students will seek educational opportunities at a community college (Luzzo, 2000). Since people no longer stay in the same jobs for a lifetime, short, targeted programs of the type offered by community colleges may be increasingly selected over longer-term degree programs. This paper will examine the utility of a narrative approach in conjunction with traditional approaches to career counselling when working with college students.

Community College Students: Needs and Common Approaches

The demographics of a typical "student" at community colleges are also shifting - see Figure 1. The culture of a community college has been described as a "hybrid" of secondary school and traditional four-year postsecondary institutions, such as universities (Watt, Huerta, & Alkan, 2012). Community colleges are places of increasing diversity with respect to the age, gender, and ethnicity of their student population (Luzzo, 2000). A commonly used approach to career counselling in community colleges involves an attempt to "match" the characteristics of the individual to those of a job; this process tends to be based on Holland's (1970) research. This process may take varying forms but the traditional approach usually involves examining the "fit" between a person's abilities and/or interests and the tasks required by a given occupation. One example of such "matching" is the frequently used SDS (Self-Directed Search), a self-report instrument based on Holland's (1970) that matches individuals with career choices based on their interests, which are separated into six code types: Realistic, Conventional, Artistic, Social, Investigative, and Enterprising. It has been noted that this



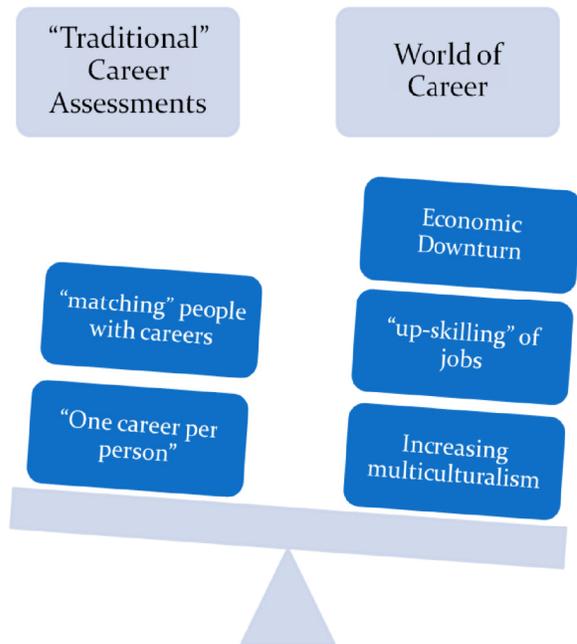
Figure 1

Community College: A Visual Summary



Figure 2

Need for a Paradigm Shift



'matching' model, while a useful first step, may not be adequate to help students navigate today's career world (McMahon & Watson, 2012). I would contend that the pure "matching" approach does award enough importance to situ

ational or cultural factors that may impact career decision-making; additionally, it implies that there is one specific job for each person rather than viewing the career trajectory as fluid and responsive to the changing work-

place climate outlined above. Figure 2 visually outlines this discrepancy.

A student's arrival at a community college is part of the larger story of their life, and the meaning they make of this step can have significant impact on their development, both vocationally and personally. For example, "displaced new traditionalists" (p. 133) is a term used by Locke and Gibbons (2008) to describe women who are reentering the workplace due to economic constraints as the result of divorce or death of their spouse. These individuals are increasingly registering at community colleges to upgrade existing skills or pursue a new career choice (Locke & Gibbons, 2008). I have worked with many of these women in my role as community college counsellor, and they represent an example of the diversity of the college population.

Because enrolling at community college implies a significant transition or shift in an individual's life story (for example, in the case of the displaced new traditionalist, as described above), I would argue that narrative therapy is uniquely situated to assist the community college student with career planning. The philosophy and practice of narrative therapy will be described below, followed by an examination of narrative interventions and instruments with particular applicability for college students.

A Narrative Approach: Philosophical Underpinnings

The philosophical roots of narrative therapy, which was



developed by David Epston and Michael White in the early 1990's, lie in social constructionism. This approach places emphasis on subjectivity, context, and the agency of the individual. The narrative career counsellor, through encouraging the client to reflect on common themes and patterns in his or her career story, facilitates change through self-knowledge and strives to promote a more unified sense of self (Epston & White, 1990).

Narrative therapy pays particular attention to the social context in which the "problem" has arisen. This is believed to help the individual separate themselves from the problem and thereby achieve greater insight and agency in their lives (Epston & White, 1990). Applying this to career counselling, asking the student to reflect on the importance placed on "doing" rather than "being" in today's society (Hanson & Amundson, 2009) is an example of this attention to social discourse.

Other dominant social discourses that may have shaped a client's career decision-making processes include those of power and privilege, gender norms, and society's prizing of certain careers (doctor, lawyer) over others. Campbell and Ungar (2004) note that "the role of the counsellor is to facilitate a discussion of social discourse that influences a client's perceptions of his or her preferred future, not necessarily in an effort to change it, but to better understand it and the forces that constrain or support its achievement" (p. 30). Narrative therapy encourages the individual to examine "sparkling

moments" (Epston & White, 1990) which are described as exceptions to the often problem-saturated story they bring to the counselling session. For example, clients may be asked to describe a time when anxiety did not have such a strong hold on them. Use of language is an important area of focus in narrative therapy. Clients are encouraged to employ a "grammar of agency," the goal of which is to empower the client to recognize the capacity they have to change the course of their story. For example, a client could be asked how long they have been in this battle with anorexia – a question that places the client in an active stance against the problem (Roth & Epston, 1996).

Career and Identity: The College Student's Experience

College students are constantly confronted with career options; they are immersed in a culture of change and confronted with a smorgasbord of training options, from university transfer courses to hands-on training in specific trades. The array of options available reflects the changing economic environment.

When a college student comes for a career counselling session, their "story" might be that of difficulty deciding on a career. The most common hope that students express to me when seeking career counselling is that of "finding a career." Students often share experiences of great anxiety and confusion when confronted by significant others in their lives who constantly ask them "but what will you do?" Behind this expressed concern is

often hidden the assumption that finding the "right career" will help coalesce their identity – an important developmental task (Erikson, 1968) and enable them to successfully field these questions. Career counselling is seen as a panacea for this anxiously lurking question, and the student is often motivated by this anxiety to seek a "quick fix" to their "career problem." Narrative career counselling questions this tendency and offers a more holistic examination of career planning situated in the context of the individual's life story.

In narrative career counselling, there is less emphasis on traits and abilities and more on the client's understanding of themselves and the world. Clients' abilities and traits have been described by proponents of narrative career counselling as similar to Lego blocks, which can be assembled or reassembled in multiple ways (Campbell & Ungar, 2004). Inherent in this approach is the notion that a client's expressed career choice is "embedded inside a much larger and more diverse narrative" (Campbell & Ungar, 2004, p. 29). Although a client may cling to a specific occupation, such as a nurse, as "the only career choice," - a situation I have encountered frequently in my work - the role of the narrative career counsellor is to help the client see this choice in the context of their lives and to link it to personally relevant life themes. In the case of nursing, healing and helping others might be themes that merit further exploration in terms of their genesis and their place in the client's life story. This



process of discovering the roots of a client's preferred future is referred to as "decoding" by narrative career counsellors (Campbell & Ungar, 2004).

Because narrative career counselling involves an exploration of the client's career goals in the context of their lives, it can help bring to light situational or internal factors that may impact the client's vocational as well as personal life. This strength of the narrative approach is particularly relevant for working with college students: most college students experience myriad stressors, and research shows that this stress is increasing (Kadison & Di Geromino Foy, 2004). Compounding this is the fact that many psychiatric disorders are diagnosed in young adulthood and also that alcohol issues are greatest among ages 18-29 (Kadison & Di Geromino Foy, 2004) - college students between 18 and 24 in particular drink more than any other age group (Koyama & Belli, 2011). Financial strain, substance abuse, acculturation issues, and homesickness can all impact college students and may need to be addressed before career counselling can commence. Narrative therapy, with its focus on the story of the whole person, can bring out these issues and, through its focus on an individual's strengths and competencies, help encourage and support the individual personally as well as vocationally.

Considering the increasing multiculturalism of our society and the globalization of the workplace, it is not surprising that college students are becoming increasingly multicultural

(Yakunina et al., 2013; Harder, 2011). "Acculturative stress" describes the practical, cultural, and social challenges experienced by many international students when adjusting to a new culture (Yakunina et al., 2013). Acculturative stress is linked to many adverse physical and mental outcomes such as increased alcoholism, depression, and general stress. Interestingly, it has been found that focusing on the strengths – both personal and multicultural – of international students has found to be a protective factor against acculturative stress (Yakunina et al., 2013). Therefore, the strengths-based orientation of narrative therapy seems well-suited for this population.

Since at the core of narrative therapy is the belief that an individual's identity and view of the world are socially constructed, it follows that encouraging the client to observe and shift the way in which they interact with their environment would help to manifest internal change. One narrative technique that has great applicability for career counselling is the notion of 'scaffolding.' This is a process by which the client is encouraged to link their past story with their present or ideal future story (White, 2007). In the context of career counselling, scaffolding can be a useful image for the counsellor to refer to when encouraging the client to elaborate on their past experiences as they relate to present situations or future career goals (McMahon & Watson, 2012). Anderson-White and Gibbons (2011) use this approach when working with adults

in career transition following a natural disaster. They encourage these individuals to "include their new reality, post-disaster, in their stories because [...] life themes would have been altered as a result of the experience" (Anderson-White & Gibbons, 2011, p. 192). Imagery and metaphor also figure prominently in narrative therapy, and are discussed below as they relate to career counselling.

Imagery and Metaphor

B.F. Skinner (1989), describing the difference between doing and sensing in his seminal paper *The Origins of Cognitive Thought*, states "the bodily condition associated with a high probability that we shall do something is hard [...] to pin down, and we resort to metaphor. Because things often fall in the direction they lean, we say we are inclined to do something [...] if we are strongly inclined, we may even say we are bent on doing it" (p. 13).

Human capacity for metaphor is thought to have evolved as an adaptive mechanism as it represents the ability to make links between seemingly unrelated constructs, which appears in part, to describe the construct of creativity. Ramahandran and Hubbard (2005) note that synesthesia, a condition characterized by a blending of two or more senses (for example, perceiving the note C sharp as bright green), is more common in painters, poets, and novelists. They conclude that the synesthesia gene, which likely results in excessive communication among



different brain areas, has probably survived due to its link to creativity – clearly an adaptive trait – and suggest that metaphor may represent a type of linguistic synesthesia (Ramahandran & Hubbard, 2005). Young children instinctively use metaphor as part of the animism and magical thinking that characterize early childhood (Piaget, 1929). Career theorists have lamented the fact that this flexibility with language tends to lessen in adulthood (Amundson, in press). Since many college students are in transition between childhood and adulthood, evoking the metaphoric language of childhood can be helpful in maintaining this cognitive flexibility as it may stimulate creativity, a helpful trait in the career planning process.

Metaphor is used in narrative therapy as a way of externalizing the problem, which has the effect of creating space between it and the client. In this space, change can occur (Epston & White, 1990). In fact, McGuinty et al., (2011) point out that the word “metaphor” comes from the Greek “metaphorin” meaning to transfer. Thus, when a child begins to view her anxiety as a monster, the anxiety has been effectively “transferred” from an internal place to an external one (McGuinty et al., 2011). Use of metaphor in therapy has shown success with prison inmates (Romig & Gruenke, 2001), adolescents (Martin, 2003), and those with autism-spectrum disorders (McGuinty, Armstrong, Nelson & Sheeler, 2011). These clients may display experience difficulty with or resistance to

wards describing their “problem;” therefore, the use of metaphor, because of its distancing effect, would likely be effective with these populations. In career counselling, - particularly with college students who may only have a nascent idea of the meaning of “career” - as it relates to identity, use of metaphor, in addition to the distancing function described above, can help bring clarity by virtue of pulling various conceptual elements together into a simple, coherent image (Amundsen, in press). Shifting metaphors can also shift therapeutic progress. For example, in career counselling, transforming the commonly used image of a “career path” to one of a “voyage” - which takes into account fellow sailors and shifting tides – can shift the meaning of the career exploration process (Anderson, 2013).

One expressed concern about the use of metaphor is a projected difficulty applying it to those from other cultures (Amundson, in press). However, Amundson also points out that many metaphors are universal in nature. Also, while the narrative therapist may generate metaphors, it is considered a more powerful and personally relevant intervention if the client is able to generate his or her own metaphor (Amundson, 2014).

In my experience, expanding on the client’s own expressed metaphor results in an enriching experience for both counsellor and client and may provide an opportunity for cross-cultural learning. For example, one client of Iranian heritage described her current depression to

me as “keeping me from watering the garden of my mind” (personal communication, October 15, 2011). This spontaneously generated metaphor resulted in rich subsequent dialogue about the fruits of her garden and what might be needed to sustain them; it also provided ample evidence of the skills and competencies she brought to her career search. Metaphor can also be helpful in breaking down barriers to communication in the case of non-native English speakers. Metaphor can be more fluid than literal language since the image it conjures is often immediately understood by the listener even without cultural familiarity with a given metaphor.

In career counselling, one of the most commonly invoked metaphors is that of construction or of co-construction (McMahon & Watson, 2012). This metaphor brings to mind the mutual putting together of objects with the goal of creating a structure or object of some kind; career counsellors typically refer to the “construction” of a career identity. However, Poehnell and Amundson (2002) suggest that “crafting” is a more appropriate term as it encapsulates the more finely detailed and creative process involved in narrative career counselling. I concur with these authors that “crafting” is a more nuanced term; more importantly, however, I would contend that this shift from “crafting” to “construction” is an example of the power of metaphor to change how events are viewed.



Therapeutic Documents

One way for the client to build a bridge (to use a narrative metaphor) between their old and their new story is by writing or receiving a therapeutic document. The writing of therapeutic letters in narrative therapy could be viewed as a concrete manifestation of the notion of “re-authoring” problematic narratives. David Epston (1990) was noted for writing a letter to his client after every session. These letters became the client’s “clinical file,” which, rather than being hidden in a drawer out of sight of the client, was shared between client and therapist (Epston & White, 1990).

Letter writing has many potential positive outcomes which are relevant to career counselling with younger or resistant clients – for example, clients who have been “mandated” to see a career counsellor by their parents, a situation frequently encountered by myself. Since many community college students have recently navigated adolescence and may be in transition from the role of child to adult (for example, living alone for the first time), they may present with resistance and other behaviours often seen in adolescent clients.

Kress, Hinkle, and Protivnak (2011) found that letter-writing was a particularly useful intervention in school counselling. They note that their adolescent clients tended to forget conversations they had during counselling sessions and subsequently question the effectiveness of a solely verbal exchange.

They also point out that writing letters may be less threatening to adolescent clients than direct conversation. In addition, writing letters can help promote a sense of autonomy and control, an important developmental need (Martin, 2003) since they alone are the author of the document. Several examples of therapeutic letters are noted by Kress et al. (2011) in their work with students. These include “letters from the future,” in which the student imagines that he or she has already successfully navigated the current problem, “letter to a friend,” in which the student, as the “expert” on the current problem, writes to a friend with advice and suggestions on how to tackle this problem, and the “rainy day letter” in which the student composes a letter from the perspective of the future in which they are having a “good day” and provides encouragement with respect to their present struggles (Kress et al., 2011). A narrative technique that is often integrated into letter-writing and has particular applicability for career counselling is the idea of guides or mentors. Guides are defined as figures (real or fictional) which possess some aspect (attribute, skill) to which the client aspires. Epton and White (1990) note that the idea of the guide is taken from the archetype of the “wise person” frequently seen in common folklore. Guides have often experienced hardships on their journey with which the client may identify. Alternatively, a guide can be a person who helped the client at a point where he or she was in greatest need. For exam-

ple, a nursing student described to me an experience of being seriously ill and cared for by an exceptional nurse as precipitating her decision to enter the field of nursing. In my experience, guides can range from a pop musician to a historical figure or someone’s aunt. The client can be asked to write a letter from this guide containing advice or encouragement related to career planning. The client can also simply be asked what a guide might say if presented with the current “problem” the client is facing.

Narrative Instruments

It has been difficult to translate the philosophical tenets of post-modernism and social constructionism into concrete career planning activities, as noted by Campbell and Ungar (2004). It has been even more challenging to develop instruments that measure “narrative change,” the desired outcome of most narrative approaches. One instrument that has been used to measure narrative change in the context of career exploration is the Future Career Autobiography (FCA; Rehfuss, 2009). It consists of an open-ended prompt: “Please use this page to write a brief paragraph about where you hope to be in life and what you hope to be doing occupationally five years from now.” The sheet is titled “Future Career Autobiography” (Rehfuss, 2009). Recently, this measure’s validity was tested in a study of 82 Italian female entrepreneurs (Rehfuss & Di Fabio, 2012). Several differences were found in participants’ narratives



in the group that had received the narrative intervention versus the group that had received no intervention. Of note was the finding that 95% of participants in the experimental group showed evidence of themes representing change in their narratives, whereas only 11.9% of those who had received no intervention presented with change themes. Themes that emerged for the experimental group were movement from generality to specification, disregard to direction, vagueness to focus, and hindered to hopeful (Rehfuss & Di Fabio, 2009). The results of this study seem to indicate that the FCA is a narrative tool that can help stimulate forward movement in career decision-making.

Campbell and Ungar (2004) propose a model of seven aspects of life/work design that may be explored with the client at various temporal points in therapy, depending on the client's current needs. This approach involves first an exploration of career goals followed by an examination of internal and external resources; finally, stories of constraint are contrasted with preferred stories and room is provided for change to occur as the client's story evolves.

Another instrument combines the traditional Holland codes with narrative questions: the ISI (Integrated Structured Interview; McMahan & Watson, 2010). This instrument is composed of narrative questions which follow from the traditional data (Holland codes) obtained from the SDS (Self-Directed Search). For example, a question asked in this instrument is "In

what ways is the first letter of your code evident in your life?" (McMahan & Watson, 2012, p. 444). The authors of this instrument note that the ISI is unique in its combination of qualitative narrative intervention and quantitative assessment. This instrument shows great promise not only for individual career counselling with community college students, but also as part of a group counselling exercise – many community colleges now offer career exploration workshops designed to reach a larger number of students in an efficient manner.

Criticisms and Directions for Future Exploration

One of the most frequently cited concerns about the narrative approach is its length. The word "narrative" itself conjures images of lengthy storytelling and, as colleagues have frequently cautioned me, implies a disregard for the trend towards managed care and brief, solution-focused therapy of the kind currently espoused by many community colleges due to increased usage of services and time constraints. However, McMahan and Watson's (2012) ISI assessment can be completed in one session, assuming the SDS has already been completed. Furthermore, many of the assessment tools can be implemented in group settings, thus increasing their cost-effectiveness. As trends move towards managed care and shorter duration of counselling sessions, it is expected that more such interventions will be developed.

Another criticism of the narrative approach is one leveled at post-modern approaches in general: the difficulty in translating a philosophical orientation into practical interventions (Campbell & Ungar, 2004). While this problem is acknowledged by many narrative career therapists, a number of options – in the form of narrative career interventions and assessment instruments – have been and continue to be created, including those cited in this article (e.g. McMahan & Watson, 2012; Rehfuss & di Fabio, 2009).

Lastly, there are concerns that narrative therapy, lacking a strong empirical base such as the one that exists for CBT, is ineffective or 'unscientific' (Epston, Stillman & Erbes, 2012). One obvious response to this criticism is that it is difficult to empirically validate an approach without significant funding or interest from the research community. However, studies are increasingly being conducted that demonstrate the effectiveness of narrative therapy for a wide range of concerns: from eating disorders (Brouwers, 1994) to substance abuse (Morgan, Brosi & Brosi, 2011) and PTSD (McPherson, 2011), to the narrative career counselling interventions described in this paper.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the unique needs of the growing and diverse population of community college students. I have examined the philosophy, interventions, and instruments used by career counsellors working from a narrative perspective and



discussed their applicability for use with college students. Numerous aspects of narrative therapy seem uniquely suited to counselling this population. Namely, the “scaffolding” approach of linking past stories with projected future ones is very applicable to this population in transition; use of metaphor is a helpful tool for work with many types of clients represented at community colleges such as young adults, resistant clients, and those from other cultures, and the strengths-based nature of this approach can help reduce acculturative stress. Furthermore, many narrative interventions, such as the writing of therapeutic documents and the identification of “guides,” mimic the community college culture with its homework assignments and “program advisors.” Narrative therapy’s focus on employing a grammar of agency and fostering a sense of self-efficacy on the part of the client seems particularly relevant considering the rapid changes in the workplace described in the introduction to this paper; for example, the electronic era into which the world of career is moving. Bandura (2002) notes that the advent of internet technology has changed the competencies required of individuals in the workplace. He suggests that educational institutions must shift their emphasis from imparting knowledge to teaching students how to seek it – in effect, to develop their sense of agency. Lastly, the holistic examination afforded by narrative therapy can help illuminate potential internal or external client factors that may impact career decision-making.

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