Therapeutic Resonance Across the Miles: An Examination of Distance Counselling Through the Lens of Theory Exploration - A PhD Student's Quest to Commit

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Abstract

This paper considers the significance of the theoretical underpinnings behind the practices employed by career counsellors, with a brief examination of four theoretical approaches to career development within a postmodern paradigm. Faced with new ways of interacting and building relationships with our clients, counsellors must consider the impact of resonance and whether or not distance counselling can achieve these same goals. Written from the perspective of a graduate student attempting to commit to a dissertation focus by exploring a variety of theories within the field of career development, this paper ultimately asks the question – is it possible to build a therapeutic relationship with a client when physical proximity is not possible, or is the intimacy required for effective counselling only possible in a face to face setting. Exploring the idea that the career counselling relationship is most effective when human intimacy is fostered through embodied limbic resonance, this paper considers the influence of Buber's (1974) discussion of human encounter, as well as Lewis et al.'s (2000) focus on love and empathy as essential ingredients within any counselling relationship.

With the onset of Covid-19 and the WHO's (World Health Organization) declaration of a worldwide pandemic in March, 2020, the world changed in an instant and the environment that counsellors found themselves working within changed as well. No longer was it possible to sit face to face with clients with the intention of developing a personal connection, fostering rapport, and demonstrating the physical cues associated with positive regard and empathy – traits especially valued within person-centred counselling (Farber & Doolan, 2011; Frankel et al., 2012). Instead, counsellors like myself who had practiced for many years found themselves seeking new ways to develop these human connections while working from home. It was at this time that I also found myself straddling the dual worlds of the counselling therapist and full time PhD student – focusing on counselling practice by day and counselling theory by night. Given the opportunity to more fully examine the underlying philosophical foundations that I base my techniques upon, I began to examine and re-envision the theoretical concepts behind my work in an attempt to clearly identify the focus of my future dissertation. Through an examination of philosophical theory and counselling theory I hoped to find the clarity that would allow me to commit to the central research question of whether physical proximity is necessary for effective career counselling. I was unsure whether this was a burning issue I wished to focus on for the next several years, or a passing curiosity resulting from the necessity of physical distancing during Covid-19. Regardless, I was grateful for the opportunity to think deeply about the foundational theories underlying my own counselling practice, as well as the momentum needed to catapult me into that next phase of my academic trajectory.

Theorists as Storytellers

Drapela (1990) tells us that "theory is a professional road map, as important as the use of navigational charts to a pilot who wants to stay on course" (p. 19), and that counsellors need to form, on the basis of existing theories, an operational framework that is consistent with their own worldview, personal experiences, and values. He challenges the idea that theoretical knowledge is less important than practical knowledge within counsellor education, and strongly suggests that: 1) within all psychological systems there exists a link between personality theory, counselling theory, and philosophical worldviews; 2) the public expects therapists to acquire extensive theoretical knowledge; and 3) all psychological schools of thought are extensions of the life experiences of the founding theorist. This led me to question the theories that I had attached myself to that reflected my own worldview and personal experience.

Drapela (1990) also warns against adhering to a single theory and encourages counsellors to consider that "an uncritical, rigid adherence to any theory would stifle our personality, which is the most valuable therapeutic tool that we possess" (p. 24). In this sense, counsellors restory theories so that their understanding of counselling theory fits within the philosophical worldview that has been shaped by

their own early experiences.

Being truly eclectic, however, does not mean ignoring theory and hiding behind the veil of anything goes, but requires a solid understanding of major theories so that the eclectic counsellor might consider which frameworks mesh with their own personality, needs, and values. As Drapela sums it up so eloquently, "acquiring a solid theoretical framework that encompasses personality theory and counselling theory, and that is congruent with personal life experiences and values, turns counselling practitioners into counselling professionals" (p. 26). Reflecting on these ideas, I came to understand my own use of an eclectic approach could be attributed to my evolving philosophical foundation and broadening awareness of counselling theory.

Furthermore, career counselling belongs in the general category of counselling because it has the same features that all types of counselling possess (Glysbers et al., 2003), and career counsellors require counsellor training required to assist with broader mental health concerns as well as with the emotional component of career development (Kid, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, the term counselling will encompass the term career counselling, while four specific theories of career development will be examined in more detail in an attempt to consider whether or not physical proximity is necessary for effective counselling within each theoretical framework. Finally, a brief reflection upon the contributions of holistic counselling will contribute to an understanding of the significance of limbic resonance and the intimate transpersonal relationship between counsellor and client found within this approach (Lewis et al., 2000).

Theories as Stories

Building upon the ideas of Drapela, Larsen (1999) explains that from a postmodern perspective, all psychological theories can be viewed as stories and reflect the life experience of the author as well as the greater social narrative and suggests that "each theory-story provides a lens or narrative through which to understand human experience" (p. 70). He explains that psychotherapy can be viewed as having multiple-story lines including the client's story, the therapist's story, and the theories that the therapist has chosen which reflect that therapist's story. He also believes that we can break the story down further by looking at whether the therapist uses modern or postmodern theories in her work with the client. Earlier theory stories (based on modern theory) focus on an authoritarian / expert approach, while later stories (based on postmodern theory) emphasize how clients are the authors of their own stories which are then restoried by the therapist (Ollerenshaw, J.A. & Creswell, J.W., 2002).

Postmodern Lens

Mauree & Morgan (2012) consider how shifts in psychological theories as well as economic influences have impacted career development when counselling theory is viewed through a postmodern lens. These authors identify four main economic waves within career development: 1) the agrarian society; 2) the Industrial Revolution; 3) the pursuit of a single life-long occupation; and 4) the information age where individuals shift their career many times. Written in 2012, this article identifies the need for a qualitative approach to career counselling since it was no longer appropriate to match individuals

with one life-long career that may be identified within quantitative assessment tools. While some experts in the field of career counselling still regard quantitative assessments as helpful tools, many believe in the usefulness of combing both quantitative assessment tools and qualitative approaches to counselling (Thrift & Amundson, 2005; Savickas, 2013).

While the fourth wave gave rise to career changes across lifespans, based on economic fluctuations and changing opportunities (Mauree & Morgan, 2012), a subsequent wave resulting from the current pandemic could lead to changes in the very nature of the work week and the workplace. As governments may be forced to consider guaranteed income supplements and working from home and home-schooling become the norm, where and when the average Canadian performs paid work and attends training may be in flux. While it is impossible to predict what changes are temporary and which may become embedded within our post-pandemic culture, what we can anticipate is that the worlds of work and school may never be quite the same again. It will be important to consider what this will mean for the counsellors who assist with career development, as well as whether or not physical proximity is necessary when helping clients navigate multiple jobs and changing identities over the course of a lifetime.

Whether we will experience a fifth and separate wave or not, the fact remains that it is still very difficult to fully predict the trajectory of an individual's career path, and that the quantitative assessment approaches that fall under a positivist paradigm, used on their own, may no longer be sufficient for effective career counselling (Patton & McMahon, 2013). As an alternative,

four qualitative options for career counselling present themselves within the postmodern framework: career construction theory, narrative career counselling theory, life design counselling theory, and self-construction theory. I have considered how each approach helps inform whether or not physical proximity may be necessary for an effective counselling relationship.

Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory (Savickas 2002, 2007, 2013) is a qualitative approach to career development that is based upon the philosophical foundation of social constructivism. Within this model, individuals construct their own lives (which includes their careers) by considering the meaning behind their vocational options and numerous workplace experiences. Four main questions underlie the basis of career construction theory: 1) how does work fit within other aspects of life; 2) how do people cope with change; 3) what are the key motivators that create patterns and themes within a person's life; and 4) how do specific personality traits form identity (Savickas, 2013). This theory contrasts with more quantitative approaches to career development that focus on career matching rather than meaning making.

Considering the basic tenants of this theory while contemplating my research question, I would argue that each of the four questions underlying this theory could be explored and answered in a virtual environment. An examination of work-life balance, a consideration of resiliency and capacity to change, and an identification of key life motivators are all discussions that could be facilitated both in person and via distance counselling.

Furthermore, a discussion around how specific personality traits form identity and a more intimate conversation about a client's unique cluster of personality traits and preferences could also be achieved in either format, as the goal would be the exchange of relevant information rather than a personal encounter between counsellor and client.

Narrative Career Counselling Theory

Similar to career construction theory in terms of falling within a postmodern approach, narrative career counselling and narrative therapy were founded in Australia by White in the late 1980's and were based on the work of Foucault (Madigan, 1992). The narrative approach is built upon the philosophical foundation of social constructivism and relies on the counsellor's ability to encourage the client to articulate their life story so that they can make decisions about their next best steps by examining the life story or plot that has been experienced to date (Mauree & Morgan, 2012). What is appealing about the narrative approach today is that it focuses on meaning making and respects the client as the author of their own stories, where each client is the expert within their own life narrative and the counsellor is the active listener.

While the counsellor's ability to help the client retell their life story and determine a future career trajectory is paramount, it can be argued that the skills involved in active listening and empowering others are not limited by a virtual environment. On the contrary, some clients may feel a lack of inhibition when sharing their personal stories from the safety of their own homes while others would find phone and virtual communication

allows then to open up to the counsellor in a way that they may not be able to initially do in a face to face setting (Wienclaw, 2019).

Life Design Counselling Theory

A third approach to career counselling that falls within the postmodern framework includes life-design counselling theory, where an individual's life is considered from the perspective of a product under design. This approach combines Guichard's (2006) theory of self-construction with Savickas' (2005) career construction theory. Within this theory is the recognition that careers are always explored within the context of a person's whole life. Mauree and Morgan (2012) suggest that four key elements are considered within this approach: 1) careers are a key aspect of a person's life but not their whole life; 2) career counselling must consider many factors within a person's life and not just paid employment; 3) the ability to effect changes within a person's life story determines the success and usefulness of career counselling; and 4) career adaptability is essential. Adaptability can be viewed with an even greater significance today due to the multitude of factors resulting from the pandemic: unemployment, interrupted employment, lack of childcare, business closures, homeschooling, distance-learning, working from home, and ongoing health and safety concerns.

It can be argued that the goals of this third approach, based upon the four key elements identified above, can also be achieved within a virtual setting. A lack of physical proximity does not prevent the recognition of career as a central aspect of life, nor does it prevent counsellors from drawing attention to aspects of life outside of vocation. Furthermore,

regardless of the format of the counselling session, it should still be possible to measure the degree of change within the client's life as well as assign importance to discussions around career adaptability.

Self-construction Theory

Self-construction theory, when considered independently from Savickas' (2005) career construction theory, is based on the work of Guichard (2006). This theory looks at the question about the direction to give one's life and not about specific career choices. Guichard tells us that in today's context, it is not possible to limit career counselling to the choice of career since "more than career, it is the life-path which is at the heart of the issues of counselling in today's western societies" (p. 5). Three broad propositions describe this approach: 1) the recognition that self-construction takes place within social categories that are part of any given culture and is referred to as an identity offer; 2) the understanding that individuals construct a self-concept within their long term memory which can be viewed as an internalized identity offer of the society in which she interacts; and 3) the awareness that individuals relate to both themselves and others so that their mirrored image is both the reflection of their own self-concept as well as the reflection of how they see themselves in the context of their culture's expectations. Guichard tells us that "the trinity reflexivity of I-You-They refers to the process of synthesizing self-concept" (p. 9) as a person within a society of other persons self-constructs their identity.

In contrast to the first three career development theories, it can be argued that a central aspect of self-construction theory relies on this ability for one person to see themselves reflected within the eyes of another, which includes how they come to see themselves within the greater social narrative. It therefore can be understood that the relationship between counsellor and client is central to this goal and that physical proximity needs to be examined further to determine whether or not the intimacy required for the synthesizing of self-concept within the trinity reflexivity identified by Guichard can be achieved in a virtual setting. Further consideration of the influence of Martin Buber (1878-1965) expands upon central ideas within self-construction theory and the question as to whether or not physical proximity is necessary for effective career counselling.

Influence of Martin Buber

While Buber is not referenced within the Guichard article, there is an obvious connection between the trinity reflexivity within self-construction theory and the philosophical foundations presented within Buber's best-known work, *I and Thou* (Buber, 1974). The basic premise underlying Buber's work is the understanding that humans engage with their world in two very distinct ways. Buber refers to the first way as experience (the mode of I-It), and implies that humans relate to objects outside of themselves within the cognitive process of collecting, analyzing, categorizing, and creating theories about data experienced as a subjective 'it' separate from oneself. Buber then introduces a second very different way of interacting with the world, which humans rarely do within our modern western culture, and calls this mode of interaction encounter (the mode of I-You). He suggests that this second mode of relationship is necessary for us to be truly human, and that within this mode of interaction there is no separateness between subject and object. Here the I and You encounter one another fully and become transformed by that encounter. According to Buber, inanimate objects such as nature, animals, or other humans can all be considered a You to be encountered, and each encounter with other humans can best be described as love.

Reflection upon the words of Buber has reminded me of the importance of the relationship between counsellor and client and whether we enter into that relationship with the initial goal of experience or encounter. The counsellor who shares an experience with a client relates to that client as a subject to be understood and provides opportunities for the client to consider, articulate, analyze, and make decisions about potential linear options within a lifetime. In contrast, the counsellor who shares an encounter with a client engages in a profound connection that is transpersonal in nature. Here the healing presence of the counsellor and positive regard and empathy for the client's well-being act as a catalyst for empowerment, where the client is made aware of her own self-worth as reflected through the eyes of her counsellor and felt as a resonance between their limbic brains. The following reflection upon the writing of Lewis et al. (2000) also recognizes the necessity of the emotional connection between the limbic brains of the counsellor and client, as well as the importance of love.

A General Theory of Love: Triune Brain Theory

Lewis et al. (2002) consider how scientific discoveries about the neurobiology of the brain as well as current theories in psychology present the argument that much of the strug-

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gles within our modern world can be attributed to our ancient, innate urge for intimacy. They introduce triune brain theory which portrays the brain as consisting of three main sections which evolved over millions of years as lifeforms evolved from reptiles to early mammals to modern humans. Triune brain theory of the human brain includes the brain stem responsible for vital functions such as breathing and swallowing, the limbic brain which originated with early mammals and is the emotional centre of our being, and the neocortex which is the centre responsible for language, analytical thought and executive functioning. The passionate argument that Lewis et al. make is that for optimal health, humans need to have experienced early loving and secure relationships with the main caregivers in their lives so that they are able to maintain loving relationships with other individuals later in life, and that humans are hard-wired to need to live in relation with other people. They frequently reference Bowlby's attachment theory and suggest that humans cannot even survive without human interaction, and that the purpose of the limbic brain is to allow mammals to have access to the inner emotional state of other animals, including humans:

> Within the effulgence of their new brain, mammals developed a capacity we call limbic resonance – a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states. It is this limbic resonance that makes looking into the face of another emotionally responsive creature a multilayered experience. Instead of seeing a pair of eyes as two be-speckled buttons, when we look into the ocular portals to a

limbic brain our vision goes deep: the sensations multiply, just as two mirrors placed in opposition create infinity. Eye contact, although it occurs over a gap of yards, is not a metaphor. When we meet the gaze of another, two nervous systems achieve a palpable and intimate position (p. 63).

Whether this intimate limbic resonance, embodied within our limbic brains and experienced through eye contact, is also achievable without in-person contact is of significant interest to me as I continue to explore whether or not the intimacy of physical proximity is necessary for effective counselling.

Resonance Theory within Holistic Counselling

While Stensrud & Stensrud's (1984) work on holistic counselling was written almost thirty-five years ago, their message is still very relevant to current discussions around limbic resonance theory. They tell us that within holistic counselling, the process of becoming fully aware or alive includes progression from the cognitive level, to the feeling level, to the felt meaning level, to the aliveness level. Through limbic resonance, "counsellors help their clients achieve this fourth level of experience by existing as a healing presence. What counsellors do at this level is less important than who they are. The element central to counselling at this level is an openness on the part of the counsellor to the experience of a transpersonal self" (p. 423). The transpersonal self can be understood as the connection or encounter between two humans that goes beyond individual and separate personhood – the encounter of the I-You as described by Buber.

Stensrud and Stensrud further explain that two elements make holistic counselling different from other approaches. First, holistic counselling represents a systematic eclecticism that includes a variety of approaches. Secondly, "the personal healing presence of the counsellor is more important than training or skills, the loving intent of a healthy, empathetic person is of the utmost importance in any relationship, and it may be that we can best help people become fully themselves by sharing with them who we are" (p. 423). This leads me to question whether or not it is possible for the counsellor to develop this close relationship, act as a healing presence, and form that limbic resonance with the client when physical proximity is not an option.

Remaining Questions: The Importance of Physical Proximity within Counselling

As a counsellor committed to helping clients explore vocation and career, I have learned from first hand experience that at the root of this search is often a quest for life meaning and authenticity that goes beyond a search for employment and training (Patton, 2007). With this goal in mind, I feel most closely aligned with the tenants found within holistic counselling as a medium for "helping people to become fully themselves" (Stensrud & Stensrud, 1984, p. 423). Furthermore, because holistic counselling represents an eclectic approach that includes theoretical frameworks closely aligned with how each individual counsellor views the world, a version of social-construction theory that moves beyond life *paths* and considers life *roles* fits best with how I work with clients engaged in career development. \

Viewed through this lens, I have not come to fully reconcile how effective virtual counselling will be for counsellors who work within a holistc counselling system usig a social-contruction theoretical framework. While I am confident that the tenants of career construction theory, narrative career counselling theory, and life design counselling theory are not dependent upon physical proximity, I question how impactful a social construction theory approach to career counselling may be in a virtual setting. Following Guichard's (2006) reference to the importance of helping clients synthesize self-concept by mirroring themselves within the eyes of another, I continue to ponder whether this mirroring can adequately take place in a virtual setting. Whether the transference of tangible loving energy, said to be facilitated within our limbic brains by Lewis et al. (2000), and referred to as a transpersonal encounter by Buber (1974), can take place without intimate in-person contact, and whether these elements are essential to effective counselling in general and career counselling in particular, is a focus worthy of further exploration.

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