A Model for the Co-Authored Interpretation of My Career Chapter

Peter McIlveen a *, Jan du Preez b

Abstract

My Career Chapter is described as a semi-structured procedural model for narrative career counselling. The paper begins with the main theoretical underpinnings of the model, including the emphasis upon a dialogical perspective on career identity and narrative. The three phases of the model are outlined, beginning with the initial interview, followed by the writing of a career-related autobiographical manuscript, and finally the interpretation of the manuscript. As the first two stages are already articulated in the career counselling literature, in the paper the interpretation phase is addressed in greater detail. Research evidence demonstrates a positive impact upon clients, however future research should address its hand-written and electronic administration, and use in languages other than English. The paper finishes with recommendations for its use by clients and counsellors who prefer a semi-structured approach to narrative career counselling, as distinct from open-ended unstructured approaches.

Keywords: My Career Chapter, dialogical self, systems theory framework, STF, narrative career counselling;

Selection and/or peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Jacobus G. Maree

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1. Introduction

Every person is a story. Some chapters of the story are complete and well-rehearsed, whereas other chapters of the story are presently being written or revised as incomplete drafts. A story has the capacity to capture past, present and future at once. The process of authoring and narrating one’s story is the focus of narrative career theories. Theories of career development and models of narrative career counselling emanate from the constructivist/social constructionist paradigm (Maree, 2007; McIlveen & Patton, 2007b; McMahon & Patton, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2011). Notable among the approaches to career counselling are the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) and
its model for career counselling practice (Savickas, 2011), the story-telling approach (Brott, 2001; McMahon, 2006, 2007), and the seminal model of narrative career counselling defined by Cochran (1997). Emerging among these exemplars is a dialogical model of narrative career counselling (McIlveen, 2011; McIlveen & Patton, 2007a) that draws upon the theory of dialogical self (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). In this paper we overview the central tenets of the dialogical approach to career construction and a procedural model for its operationalization in career counselling, namely My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2006). My Career Chapter makes a valuable contribution to the field because it is theory-driven and practically useful for the career counsellor who aims to facilitate the process of a client authoring and narrating a career story.

My Career Chapter was originally designed for use in career counselling for adult university students, many of whom had not received sufficient career counselling prior to enrolment in university. At the time of its development there were no narrative career counselling resources that had sufficient exploratory depth suitable for students who are, on the whole, articulate clients capable and interested in the experience of narrative counselling. Furthermore, at that time there was no narrative procedure that was designed specifically to operationalize the theory of dialogical self in career counselling. With necessity as the mother of invention, My Career Chapter was designed to take clients through an autobiographical self-exploration process that resulted in a career story amenable to interpretation in counselling. A striking feature of the experience of completing My Career Chapter is that clients state that it enables them to write about their careers for the first time and, moreover, literally hear their stories for the first time. In this article, My Career Chapter is described along with an expanded explanation of its interpretive process in counselling.

1.1. Narrative Product and Process

To arrive at an understanding of career from a narrative perspective it is helpful to distinguish between the noun and verb forms of the word story. The first form, story, is a product (albeit an unfinished opus), whereas the second form, storying, is an active process. As the art and science of an intimate form of conversation, counselling necessarily focuses upon the process of storying as being a way of scripting a story that profoundly transforms a client’s meanings, meaning-making, and future actions. Indeed, at this point, it is important to highlight an assumption of the narrative approach: That past and present can be re-interpreted and re-authored for the instrumental purpose of creating a new framework for meaning-making and guiding future actions. Past events per se cannot be remade, but their interpretation can be revised through editorial processes conducted by an individual himself/herself and/or in communication with others. It is the latter process of editing in communication with others that is central to a dialogical perspective on story and storying, and the practice of narrative career counselling.

1.2. A Story of Self but Not a Self-Story

At a macro-level, Brott (2001) described the counselling process in terms of the client and counsellor constructing, de-constructing, and co-constructing a story with one another. These three concepts are of fundamental importance as they differentiate narrative career counselling as a social constructionist endeavour. A person lives within his or her autobiographical story that is phenomenologically experienced by only himself/herself; however it is not the case that this story is solely autobiographically written. The prefix auto, which means self, presents a misnomer of sorts. With client and counsellor actively engaged in the process of storying, the story that emerges in counselling becomes a cobiography rather than an autobiography composed purely by the client.
This conundrum presents conceptual and practical problems-to-be-solved: Such as knowing the boundaries of self, knowing what is the client’s and what is the counsellor’s part to play in the co-constructive process, and knowing what in the story is to be authentically owned and lived by the client. Furthermore, the line between author and co-author becomes blurred when one considers that an individual has more than one author and one voice within himself/herself. At this juncture we turn to the theory of dialogical self as a way of elucidating the complexities of self and authorship.

1.3. Dialogical Self

The theory of dialogical self (Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992) conceptualises identity in terms of dialogue among voices that emanate from others within the person’s social sphere and imagined voices from within the person (i.e., psychological). At one level of dialogue an individual talks with other people. The voices of that dialogue are audible to one another and the external observer. Within the same interlocutory transactions there are imagined voices too. While listening to another person speaking, one person may very well hear the dialogue of the same interlocutor, another person or persons, of him/herself talking subvocally (i.e., psychologically within) in relation to the other.

For example, while the first author, Peter, hears his friend Jan, the second author, say “I really enjoyed that game of football last night”, Peter virtually, simultaneously hears his own subvocal talk saying “Yes, but it would have been better if your team had not been awarded that penalty”. In this instance, Peter is having a conversation with Jan and a conversation with himself. Peter is hearing and engaging with Jan’s voice and his own voice internally, in an imagined dialogical space. What happens after Jan departs the scene, feeling very good about reminding Peter of his teams defeat, is important to understanding the dynamics of dialogical self. Peter may subvocally replay the conversation between himself and Jan, imaginatively engaging in a conversation with him. Peter may hear Jan heaping scorn upon his team and feel his irritation in response to Jan’s commentary. None of this subvocal chatter is real however; it is all imaginary dialogue; but it is real enough to Peter as author and narrator—he who constructs the story and also tells the story in the sounds of his own voice and the imagined sounds of Jan’s voice. This is a relatively simplistic example involving only four voices: Jan’s audible voice and Peter’s imagined rehearsal of Jan’s voice, Peter’s actual voice heard in his own ears as he talks, and his imagined voice talking subvocally. Subvocal dialogue is ordinarily more complex with multiple voices engaging in dialogue with one another. One could, for example, generate a voice of one’s self as a father, a husband, a psychologist, a patient, or one may generate the voice of another person, a friend, a colleague, a parent, and then engage in dialogue with a host of others—all embodied within the same. This way the organising I can take various positions, referred to as I-positions. Hermans (2006) described this natural and wondrous cacophony that is self as a theatre of voices. Thus, identity is understood as a co-construction made in dialogue with self and others—real and imagined.

The dialogical counsellor aims to facilitate a client identifying the many and varied I-positions available to him or her, including those experienced loudly and affectively, and those whose voices are relatively distant and rarely heard. Different I-positions can be given a hearing in terms of its relations with other I-positions. For example, in counselling for a family matter, the I-position of one’s self as father may need to engage in a discussion with the I-position of one’s own father who is imaginatively endowed with a voice, and then explore the range of conversations and emotions associated with that particular dyad of I-positions.
2. My Career Chapter—A Dialogical Autobiography

Hermans pioneered the use of qualitative and quantitative methods derived from the theory of dialogical self, namely the Self-confrontation Method (Hermans, 1987; Hermans, Fiddelaers, de Groot, & Nauta, 2001; Hermans, Rijks & Kempen, 1993) and the Personal Position Repertoire (Hermans, 2001, 2003); other innovations include the Personality Web (Raggatt, 2000). My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2006) represents a conceptual merger (McIlveen, 2007b) of the theory of dialogical self and the systems theory framework (STF) of career (Patton & McMahon, 2006). My Career Chapter was specifically developed for career counselling and its application is most readily demonstrated in the elucidation of life themes through narrative constructed in career counselling (McIlveen, 2011). My Career Chapter itself is a booklet administered in print or electronic form. There are three phases to the procedure: first, an initial interview; second, completion of the “manuscript”; and third, interpretation. Each phase is described.

2.1. Phase One: Initial Interview

The procedure of My Career Chapter begins with an initial semi-structured interview that ranges across the career influences identified in the STF: individual system (including intrapersonal factors such as personality and gender); the interpersonal social system (with a focus on relationships with significant persons, including family members as well as role models and mentors); and the environmental or societal system (in which factors such as geographical location, the employment markets and educational institutions may be explored). The client and counsellor talk about each influence as a way of preparing for the narrative writing process and, moreover, to expand the dialogue beyond the usual targets of career counselling (e.g., interests, skills, abilities).

2.2. Phase Two: Writing the Manuscript

Following the initial interview, the client is given a print or electronic copy of My Career Chapter to complete before the next counselling session. Clients progress through sections in the booklet that begins with a “warm-up exercise” of writing responses to general questions regarding career influences. Following the warm-up clients complete a process that requires them to self-estimate the psychological distance and relations between I-positions that are internal (e.g., interests, gender, health) and external (e.g., social class, geographical location) in the STF. The main body of My Career Chapter consists of a series of semi-structured writing tasks that compile into the manuscript of the client’s story. Clients write to a sentence-completion process that requires the composition of statements concerning the career influences identified in the STF. Each influence has a past, present, and future oriented sentence-stem, along with stems that address the emotional qualities and impact of the influence. Completing each of the five sentence stems produces a paragraph for each influence. Clients may write additional sentences following a sentence-stem. Thus, the manuscript progressively builds with each paragraph written for each career influence.

An important part of the procedure is the client reading aloud his/her manuscript to himself/herself and providing feedback on the story to himself/herself; thus generating dialogue within oneself. Typically the client reads aloud the manuscript to a younger imagined version of himself/herself (i.e., an I-position) and then the younger person speaks back across time to the present person (i.e., another I-position). This self-reflection contributes to the client’s understanding of his/her narrative and commitment to its personal veracity. The process of reading aloud the manuscript is completed...
again by the counsellor in the next session. Inherent to the reading aloud by the counsellor is initial thematic interpretation of the narrative by the counsellor and the client (e.g., highlighting themes) (McIlveen, 2011).

2.3. Phase Three: Interpreting the Manuscript

Although the initial interview and the writing and reading tasks are described in the career counselling literature there is a need to further describe and practically develop the interpretation process to extend it beyond simple thematic analysis toward an action-oriented procedure. Thus, in the remainder of this paper is an overview of the approach to the interpretation phase.

2.3.1. Conceptual Foundations of Interpretation

Prior to describing the interpretive process, it is important to overview the conceptual foundations of the approach to interpreting the manuscript written in My Career Chapter booklet. The construct of self-efficacy is central to the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) and attendant counselling interventions (Lent, 2005; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2002). The SCCT has amassed an appreciable volume of empirical research that indicates its capacity to explain career-related behaviours in terms of self-efficacy, performance expectations, and goals, particularly in educational settings (Brown et al., 2008). It is therefore appropriate that career counselling addresses the assessment and enhancement of self-efficacy. Given that verbal persuasion and affective experience are sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), narrative career counselling, as a co-constructive endeavour that aims to generate growth-oriented stories, lends itself to supporting the development of client’s self-efficacy in educational contexts.

We acknowledge that the method described below relates to general self-efficacy, defined by Luszczynska, Gutierrez-Dona, and Schwarzer (2005) as “the belief in one’s competence to tackle novel tasks and to cope with adversity in a broad range of stressful or challenging encounters, as opposed to specific self-efficacy, which is constrained to a particular task at hand” (p.80). Clearly the flexibility and fluidity of this self-belief is vital in tackling the uncertainty of work in the 21st century, vastly different from an idealised past when career counselling might have entailed identifying a set of interests and aptitudes for an individual and matching these to suitable job titles; employers offering work in these “jobs” would be pursued by the individual who might realistically hold the belief that hard work and application would constitute a career for life (Watson & McMahon, 2011).

In relation to applying self-efficacy theory to the model of co-authoring we are reminded of four sources of information that Bandura (1997) identifies as contributing to an individual’s sense of self-efficacy: mastery experiences (also referred to as performance accomplishments); vicarious experiences (or modelling provided by successful others); verbal (or social) persuasion (critical in the context of the multiple I-positions implicit in dialogical counselling); and affective experiences (in which individuals pay attention to their physiological and emotional states when evaluating their capabilities). In the career counselling context all of these sources of information should be utilised in highlighting positive experiences that essentially contribute to an individual’s awareness of self-efficacy. For example, an individual’s achievement in one area or sphere of activity can impact on that individual’s sense of efficacy not only in that one area or sphere of activity, but can transform the sense of self-efficacy in more general terms (Bandura, 2006). Consequently the individual might approach other, dissimilar tasks, in a self-efficacious manner.
Investigation of the proposition that an individual’s past experiences with success and failure in a variety of situations should result in a general set of expectations that the individual carries into new situations has yielded a statistically robust three factor model of self-efficacy (Bosscher & Smit, 1998; Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001; Sherer et al., 1982). The factors are: (a) willingness to initiate behaviour. The narratives of individuals with relatively higher self-efficacy might include reference to taking the first step in action, cognisant that one may not have encountered similar challenges in the past yet having the self-belief that one would find the resources to develop solutions; (b) willingness to expend effort in completing the behaviour. Behavioural indicators for individuals with relatively higher self-efficacy could include exercising control over one’s actions and the environment, despite there being no absolute certainty of a successful outcome; (c) persistence in the face of adversity – demonstrating determination to press on when encountering obstacles or setbacks; acting in a manner that suggests an acceptance that there is ‘no gain without pain’ (Fromm, 1993).

A study applying a co-authoring approach to constructing self-efficacy narratives, utilising three semi-structured interviews and a written task (Du Preez, 2010), forms the structure for the proposed model for the interpretation phase of My Career Chapter. Having completed the reading aloud process, the broad aim for the first interpretive interview is to capture the context within which the client operates: that is to gain a sense of the past and present influences on the individual (Atkinson, 1998; Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; McAdams, 2001), particularly as described in the client’s manuscript. The counsellor may start with the general question (cf. Coffey & Atkinson, 1996): When thinking about your story, how is it that you are where you are now, investigating suitable career options? The counsellor might generate prompts for information based on the influences identified in the manuscript. Besides the obvious focus on content, the counsellor should be constantly alert to instances or examples in the client’s responses (that will develop into their life-career narrative) that demonstrate self-efficacy and may, when appropriate, prompt the client to provide elaboration (or to build an association between what they have accomplished and perceived self-efficacy). The issue of agency can be made explicit by asking: When thinking about your story, what active role did you take in making a particular decision or following a particular path that proved beneficial or productive? (Atkinson, 1998; McMahon & Patton, 2006a). The importance of the behavioural component cannot be overemphasised according to Young and Domene (2011, p. 26): “agency grounded in action rather than cognition alone, is an inherent aspect of constructionist career counselling.”

McAdams (2001) makes the point that personal reflection provides a glimpse of one’s identity, in the sense that the narrative contextualises the individual’s life in social and cultural terms. Although this process can contribute to self-knowledge, the counsellor should however remain vigilant for identity statements that are inaccurate, unjustifiably negative or defeatist (e.g., I never could do math and hence I was bound to fail), and seek opportunities to interject an alternate I-position (e.g., I have struggled with math in the past, but I now realise that I can find help with the subject, or explore alternative options that might not depend quite so much on math).

Given that the interview is semi-structured it is important that any impromptu questions asked are captured for further consideration by the co-authors (client and counsellor). Acknowledging that “cost” is highly relative, modern portable recording devices of reasonable quality are generally inexpensive and if at all possible an audio recording should be made of the interview. Considering the basic tenets of the theory of dialogical self, listening to the dialogue in the interview provides opportunities for the counsellor to orchestrate the theatre of voices (Hermans, 2006), to increase the salience of some aspects of the score whilst toning down other aspects, to amplify certain I-positions.
(those that provide evidence of agency and self-efficacy) and to tone down other self-statements or I-positions.

The legitimacy of the role of the counsellor in taking this active stance in implementing the co-authoring career counselling model is defended on the grounds that the procedures should comply with the standards set out in the code of practice relevant to the practitioner. The current authors are psychologists registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Registration Agency (AHPRA) and as such comply with mandated ethical standards contained in the Code of Ethics of the Australian Psychological Society (2007). Specifically the model described here is underpinned by adherence to the principle of respect for the dignity and the rights of people (including the right to autonomy and justice); the principle of propriety (which incorporates the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, competence, and responsibility to clients and broader society); and the principle of integrity (reflecting the need for psychologists to have good character and acknowledging the high level of trust intrinsic to their professional relationships).

2.3.2. The First Interpretive Interview

In summary, the first interpretive interview captures the dialogue between counsellor and client, and records a narrative-in-process, one that potentially contains some revisions that highlight the client’s self-efficacy and hence may be termed “a new story” (Campbell & Ungar, 2004, p.36). The counsellor and the client are urged to agree to review the audio recording after the first session, as “homework”, with the objective to highlight examples of self-efficacious behaviour on the part of the client. Both parties are encouraged to record this information in writing (either electronically, which enables the information to be stored, retrieved, edited, and communicated more easily, or in handwritten form, towards the same ends).

2.3.3. The Second Interpretive Interview

The second interpretive interview begins with a review of the respective reflections of the client and the counsellor. Ideally the counsellor should read out loud the written reflections of the client, providing the opportunity for the client to hear their own voice, as it were. This practice allows the client to distance him/herself from their subjective position to some extent, to gain a perspective on an externalised reality. The counsellor’s reflections are likely to be of two types: some observations will be affirming of the client’s statements, providing positive reinforcement of self-efficacious behaviour; other observations might challenge the client’s perception, amplify the achievements identified by the client, or add information that the client failed to highlight. These reflections expand the repertoire of positive self-statements available to the client, and function in accordance with the concept of verbal persuasion.

Taking cognisance of the relatively limited life (and work) experience of some of our clients, the focus of the reflections must not be limited merely to past achievements, as Mary Gergen (2004) reminds us “we make stories of the past and live into the future” (p. 270). Hence the emphasis should be on highlighting themes of self-efficacy that can be incorporated into a new awareness by the client of expanded possibilities. The sense of expansion is clearly explicated in Boyd and Faler’s definition (as cited in Murphy & Atkins, 1994, p.13) of reflection as the “process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective”. The cyclical and iterative nature of the
The second interview should ideally be audio taped for the reasons previously outlined. Similarly the “homework” task for client and counsellor is to review the second interview and to reflect on the significant learning points about the client’s self-efficacy. In addition the client is requested to write about at least one instance of each of the following (derived from the self-efficacy literature reviewed above). To write about a time when they showed initiative in taking some action that contributed to a positive outcome. The client is requested to provide a context (i.e., to write a story) describing the circumstances in which they made a decision to pursue a certain goal, highlighting the alternative option(s)—which might include the option of no action. By reflecting on a positive outcome the client is providing evidence of “I can do” behaviour. Whilst it is permissible for the client to use an example from the material discussed to this point, the client should be encouraged to reflect on a range of experiences, with the idea of building a repository of narratives covering a variety of circumstances, supporting the concept of generalised self-efficacy. The second element of writing is directed toward describing instances when the initial spurt of energy met some resistance, either as an internal lack of resolve or failure of confidence (e.g., the various scripts we develop, often modelled on things we have been told – “you can’t do math”, “you don’t have the discipline to do that”, etc.), or external factors (e.g., insufficient time, resources, support, etc). Once again the client is urged to reflect on adverse conditions, but to describe (and vicariously re-experience) the sense of satisfaction from expending the effort required to complete the behaviour successfully. The client is encouraged to include evidence of surmounting what they consider to be the highest order of adversity they have faced. The narrative should ideally elicit a response along the lines of “wow, you really showed courage and persistence in dealing with those obstacles!” In the current authors’ experience the briefing provided to clients for the writing tasks is critical for the success of the exercise, for several reasons. Clients may never have had the supportive space to engage in recalling and re-telling stories that are neither dominant in, nor representative of, their experience, so may benefit from being given permission to enjoy (and celebrate having) top billing in the narratives. Reminders to “turn off” a critical internal voice—a well-practiced I-position for many—may be necessary for others. In addition to the client hearing these “instructions” in the session, and having the audio recording to listen again, it may be worthwhile to prepare a written brief to which clients can refer when completing their work.

**2.3.4. The Third Interpretive Interview**

In keeping with the iterative nature of the co-authoring model for narrative career counselling proposed here, the third interview utilises the scaffolding and structure established in the previous interviews. In similar vein the counsellor should read out loud the written reflections of the client, building the narrative repository of evidence for self-efficacy. The co-authored narrative goes beyond what has been done and who (what stereotypical person) the client has been, and signals possibilities regarding what the client can do and the type of person they can become in the future. Within this context the finer-grained issues can be faced with greater confidence, not in the sense of finding “the solution” but in terms of identifying goals, establishing what personal (individual), interpersonal (social), and environmental resources are required, which of these are available, and moving forward with a “can do” attitude. In a study employing a similar model to the one described here, several participants reported very poor academic and social experiences of school, yet their respective
narratives as mature aged persons demonstrated their agency in persevering and taking on university-level studies, with clear career goals (Du Preez, 2010).

3. Conclusion

The model of narrative career counselling described in this paper represents conceptual and methodological advancements in the field. Conceptually, My Career Chapter operationalizes a synthesis of the theory of dialogical self and the STF; methodologically, My Career Chapter facilitates dialogical talk and text through its semi-structured processes: that is, the facilitation of conversations and correspondence among the myriad I-positions that may be taken by a client. In this paper we have extended the methodological domain by articulating the interpretive processes of My Career Chapter.

There are two noteworthy caveats, procedural and empirical. First, My Career Chapter is time-consuming. The writing phase can take up to two-hours when clients give their full attention. This writing time in combination with the initial interview and interpretive interviews means that client and counsellor must be committed to an extensive process of exploration and meaning-making. Second, although research into My Career Chapter provides evidence of its positive impact upon clients (McIlveen, Ford & Dun, 2005; McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock & Hjertum, 2003; McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2008) and counselling professionals’ appraisals affirm its utility for career counselling (McIlveen, 2007a; McIlveen, Patton & Hoare, 2007) there is a need to investigate potential differences between clients’ experience of the hand-written and electronic versions, and its application in languages other than English.

Notwithstanding extant models (e.g., Savickas, 2011), a variety and choice of procedures is necessary for the conceptual and methodological advancement of narrative career counselling. My Career Chapter is orchestrated through its semi-structured processes and therefore suitable for clients and counsellors who prefer a clearly defined pathway in counselling; whereas other clients and counsellors may prefer an open-ended process without much structure. Thus, My Career Chapter may be well suited to counsellors who are relatively unfamiliar with the narrative approach and in need of a framework to guide their practice.

References


