

## Dialogical Self: Co-Investigator in Career Self-Research

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**This is the pre-press author version. Cite as:**

McIlveen, P. (2017). Dialogical self: Co-investigator in career self-research. In M. McMahon (Ed.), *Career counselling: Constructivist approaches* (pp. 153-163). London, UK: Routledge.

## **Abstract**

Natural language used in conversations and therapeutic language used in dialogue between client and counsellor can be theorized as the workings of dialogical self. The metaphor of life as a story is evident in the way dialogical self is structured by conversational exchanges among multiple I-positions, embodied as the one person, who is in conversation with others real and imagined. My Career Chapter is a working model of the theory of dialogical self, applied to as narrative approach to career assessment and counselling. My Career Chapter facilitates self-reflexive dialogue with self and significant others represented as I-positions and who are part of the client's career story. As such, My Career Chapter is a method for conducting self-research and as a way of knowing oneself from multiple perspectives. In this way, the client develops a rich and meaningful narrative about career that motivates decision-making and actions toward personally significant change.

Keywords: dialogical self, My Career Chapter, career assessment, narrative career counselling

## **Dialogical Self: Co-Investigator in Career Self-Research**

Contemporary personality theory presents a tripartite framework of the person comprised of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and life stories (McAdams, 1995). Recent iterations of the tripartite framework emphasise *narrative identity* as the unique signature of a person (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In the title of his seminal paper, McAdams (1995) asked “What do we know when we know a person?” (p. 366). The answer: People may be similar with respect to traits (e.g., extraversion, conscientiousness) and characteristic adaptations (e.g., self-efficacy), but each and every person has a unique personal story that is lived by that single person. Versions of McAdams’s framework have been expressed in the literature of vocational psychology and career development (e.g., Rottinghaus & Miller, 2013; Savickas, 2001, 2005, 2013). Savickas’ notion of *life themes* is a conceptual foundation for narrative career counselling, whereby the collaborative exploration and construction of career-related story is the focus of the work by client and counsellor.

The current chapter introduces the theory and practice of My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2006), which is a career assessment and counselling tool that can be used for the work of collaborative exploration and construction of a career-related autobiography. The chapter also introduces the theory of dialogical self (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen, 1993) which serves to conceptualise the process of how My Career Chapter facilitates a conversational approach to career counselling. This introduction to My Career Chapter begins with the philosophical underpinnings of its design for a narrative approach to career counselling.

### **Epistemological Perspective**

Human beings have the extraordinary ability to talk—to talk with one another, to listen, to paraphrase, to sympathise, and to empathise. Some people are better at performing these uniquely human behaviours than others. It seems as if some people are born better at it,

whereas others improve with training and practice. What is truly remarkable about this human ability is that it not only occurs audibly, as in real conversations spoken aloud amongst individuals, but also that it occurs inaudibly, sub-vocally, as imagined conversations amongst individuals. We humans can hear these conversations going on all the time, as if in our heads. Herein is the end of the notion of an *essential self*, that singularity of being one self. Instead, self is taken to be a multiplicity of voices in dialogue with one another.

Turning away from essentialist perspectives of self revolutionises career counselling theory and practice. In philosophical terms, the essentialist perspectives may be understood as *formist* or *organicist* root metaphors for theory (Pepper, 1942). A formist perspective assumes that there are definite and identifiable consistencies in the form of phenomena. With respect to career, these metaphorical forms may include the notion of dispositional traits of personality or interest typologies (e.g., Holland, 1997). An organicist root metaphor is exemplified by developmental theories that assume a relatively predictable course of stages throughout life (e.g., Super, 1980). My Career Chapter draws on the *contextualist* (Pepper, 1942) root metaphor that has been applied to social constructionism in vocational psychology (Young & Popadiuk, 2012). A contextualist perspective does not assume positivist traditions of causality. Instead, a contextualist perspective assumes that psychological reality is multifaceted and cannot be rendered down to essential causes. In this way, a contextualist perspective assumes decentered qualities of self understood through the conceptual lens of the Systems Theory Framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2006, 2014).

In the career development literature, Savickas (2013) describes theories of career metaphorically as those of *actor*, *agent*, and *author*. The trait-and-factor or person-environment fit theories of the actor are formist (e.g., Holland, 1997). In this way, one may know oneself as a particular type given in terms of acting the behaviours of a configuration of Holland's hexagonal typology (e.g., SIA = Social, Investigative, Artistic). However, that

actor's self-knowledge of dispositional traits is different when formulated reflexively by dialogical self who is able to simultaneously act out more than one type. The stage-based theories of the agent (e.g., Super, 1980) are organicist with respect to an individual taking on specific roles (e.g., worker, student) that are of more importance in specific stages in life. Although Super's theory recognised different roles in life-space that varied with life-span (e.g., worker, student, carer), the theory did not purport a dialogical perspective on these roles. Instead, it was assumed that the roles were played out by a single agentic person. In part, the present chapter extends Super's conceptualisation of roles in life-space by articulating dialogical self into that space.

In both senses of the word *author*—as a noun and as a verb—Savickas' (2013) metaphor of author better represents the idea that individuals create their own career stories. This authorial perspective of career for career counselling appears in works by scholars who emphasise the centrality of personal story as the focus of career counselling (e.g., Cochran, 1997; McMahon, 2006; Savickas, 2011a), including excellent examples in this book, and each represent the narrative perspective in vocational psychology (Hartung, 2013). As a whole, these models of narrative career counselling use story to generate personal truths for a client and use story in an autobiographical sense. In addition to autobiographical stories, historical, cultural stories, such as fables, may be integrated into narrative career counselling to bring other meanings to the story of a client's life (e.g., Ramachandran & Arulmani, 2014).

The notion of personal truth speaks to a profoundly personalised, self-centred, ontology and epistemology. It is important to note that story is a social process co-created by more than one person for it to make meaningful sense in the real world. Indeed, story-tellers and stories need an audience (Briddick & Sensoy-Briddick, 2013). Reference to two narrative research methods, namely *narrative analysis* and *analysis of narrative* (cf., Smith & Sparkes, 2006), serves as an analogical description of the current narrative approaches to career

counselling and the generation of personal truths: (a) generatively thinking through stories and using stories to create personal truths (i.e., narrative analysis) or (b) thinking about stories (i.e., analysis of narrative). These are not mutually exclusive models of generating self-knowledge. Indeed, narrative counselling cycles between (a) generating personal knowledge through story and then (b) validating its personal truth-worthiness and authenticity.

As an analogy, cycling between narrative analysis and analysis of narrative guards against (mistaken) criticisms that a personal truth may be little more than a narcissistic delusion. For example, such criticisms may assert that despite my aspiration to be Superman, jumping off a roof will soon dispel the truthfulness of such a claim. Such faux positivism is contestable. Through narrative analysis I may well arrive at personally truthful conclusions that I possess some of the qualities of Superman, but through analysis of narrative I will affirm or disavow the substance of my truths, not by jumping off a building, but by testing these claims with my counsellor and among my social influencers (e.g., peers). Thus, according to the theory of dialogical self, the client transitions from the role of client to that of co-investigator in self-research (Hermans, 1991).

The conceptual and technical advances in narrative career counselling open up fascinating questions with regard to understanding the process of how individuals psychologically create stories as an author. First, understanding this vital phenomenological process that facilitates the process may lead to new perspectives for theory and practice of narrative career counselling. Toward those new perspectives, in this chapter I present features of the theory of dialogical self (Hermans et al., 1992) that can extend on current thinking with respect to a person's career as a story and the process of storying. This innovative perspective shifts narrative career counselling further toward a *conversational model* of career counselling reliant on engaging the multiple spatial and temporal positions of dialogical self.

Thus dialogical self conceptually enlivens Savickas' (2005) statement that "career construction, at any given stage, can be fostered by conversations that explain vocational developmental tasks and occupational transitions, exercises that strengthen adaptive fitness, and activities that clarify and validate vocational self-concepts" (p. 205).

### **Beyond I and Me: Dialogical Self**

Here is a very simple thought experiment for you, the reader, to conduct immediately: Ask yourself a question.

Now, reflect on the following questions. Who asked the question? Who answered the question? Who heard the response of the one asking and the one answering? Is the one who answered the same as the one who asked? Is the one who heard the two in dialogue the same as the one who asked and the one who answered? In order for this simple transaction to take place there has to be at least three protagonists, all embodied as one person. How is it that all three protagonists are one and the same person endowed with different voices spoken from different juxtapositions in the triangular dialogue?

It is a mind-boggling conundrum, but it may be carefully thought about through the I-Me model of self written by one of psychology's foundation scholars, William James (1890/1952). In his treatise, *The Principles of Psychology*, James recognised the potential multiplicity of self in writing "a man has a many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind" (p. 189-190). James describes the consciousness of *self* extending from a knowledge of what is truly personally owned (i.e., one's bodily experience as the nucleus of the "me") to material possessions, personality traits and values, and to social roles. These are the elements of the *empirical Me*; it is the Me that is known to oneself, the Me has belongings (e.g., clothes, family, friends) and belongs to other entities (e.g., family, social groups).

“To think ourselves as thinkers” (James, 1890/1952, p. 191) as a reflexive capacity is crucially intrinsic to what James described to be the *pure ego*, which is conceptually distinct from the psychoanalytic use of the term. To James, the ego is the stream of awareness, that thinking process that connects past, present, and future, so as to enable a person to know himself/herself as the same person today as he/she was yesterday and tomorrow. Thus, the pure ego is the self-conscious knower, the *I*; whereas what is known of oneself as corporeal or psychological possessions is the *Me*.

With respect to career counselling, “whereas Super investigated conceptual understandings of me, Tiedeman aimed for a more reflective perspective on the I” (Savickas, 2011b, p. 27). It is at this juncture that dialogical self stands to make the greatest contribution to the theory and practices of narrative career counselling. The theory of dialogical self extends the I-Me model in two important ways: spatial-temporal positioning and dialogue; moreover, it provides a theory to understand the process of how stories are psychologically created.

### **Dialogical Self in I-positions**

The single most important conceptual innovation provided by the theory of dialogical self is the precept that the I is not unitary; there is no single autonomous I overseeing the Mes. Instead, the I is heterogeneous in its capacity to simultaneously create different, multiple positions (i.e., *I-positions*) juxtaposed in psychological space and time.

As in a landscape, the “I” has the possibility to move from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The “I” is able to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The different voices relate to one another as interacting characters in a story, who from their respective “I” positions exchange information about their

respective “me(s)” and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self (Hermans et al., 1993, pp. 215-216).

The last sentence of this quotation is particularly important because it suggests that there can be dialogue among I-positions. And, it is the dialogue that underpins a person’s capability to create meaningful stories.

Returning to the thought experiment posed above, you the reader took three I-positions: you who asked the question, you who answered the question, and you who observed the interchange. Thus, dialogical self is “a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous ‘I-positions’ in an imaginal landscape” (Hermans et al., 1993, pp. 215-216). Although you are embodied as one person, to complete this very simple task you had to generate (at least) three unique perspectives, each with its own distinctive voice.

Hermans (2006) used the metaphor of a theatre of voices to capture the idea that there may be multiple conversations between different I-positions occurring at any one time. That constant chatter a person can figuratively hear going on inside his/her head. The cognitive resources of attention and concentration enable a person to focus on specific dialogue between limited numbers of I-positions rather than experience a cacophony of voices. It is hypothesised that psychosis is a phenomenon of the theatre of voices whereby the volume and number of conversations reaches an uncontrolled cacophony (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2002).

From the perspective of dialogical self, a person’s autobiography is the opus of more than one author; it is authored from the perspectives of multiple I-positions, it is narrated by multiple Mes, and it is under constant editorial review through the process of dialogue among the I-positions. Thus, a person comprises, at any place in time, an evolving autobiographical anthology of incomplete stories. My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2006) utilises a process that induces conversations between I-positions (McIlveen, 2011, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The theory of dialogical self is soundly articulated in the personality and psychotherapy literature (for excellent surveys of the literature see: Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), but its presence in the career development literature is inchoate at best (e.g., McIlveen & Patton, 2007). Nonetheless, research has yielded promising evidence of the theory's practical utility for career education and counselling (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). The current chapter contributes to the articulation of dialogical self to the vocational psychology and career development literature.

**Title/Topic: My Career Chapter****Aims/Learning Objectives:**

Students or clients who use My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2006) will develop enhanced self-awareness, an understanding of major themes that are present in their career autobiographies and the systems of influences on their careers.

**Client group with whom you use it:**

My Career Chapter is designed for use with older adolescents and adults who present concerns about career direction or decidedness, and who need to explore and develop self-awareness. It is not recommended for children.

**Work setting recommendations:**

My Career Chapter can be used for career counselling and career education, and it is particularly useful in settings where the practitioner or educator has capacity to see clients/students on more than one occasion. My Career Chapter should not be used as a screening tool. It should not be administered in the absence of a suitably qualified practitioner or educator, or without being embedded in a course focused on career development learning if used as a self-directed learning activity.

**Recommended time:**

My Career Chapter can take up to two hours to write, depending on the level of detail the client chooses to write in his/her manuscript. It may be completed in one administrative sitting; however, it is amenable to progressive administration with its Steps completed as homework prior to the subsequent counselling session or class.

**Materials/equipment needed:**

Electronic versions of My Career Chapter are available free-of-charge at:

<http://eprints.usq.edu.au/23797/>. Its use and reproduction are controlled by a Creative

Commons licence: Attribution, No Derivatives. It can be completed electronically using a word processor or printed to be written by hand.

**Step by step outline of the process or program:**

**Preparation.** A thorough initial interview or preparatory coursework should be completed prior to using My Career Chapter. It should not be administered unless the client or student is able and ready to engage in work that enhances self-awareness. What follows here is a process for the use of My Career Chapter in counselling rather than class-based work.

**Introduction.** Introduce My Career Chapter to the client with prefatory comments with regards to the value of writing a brief autobiographical account of career. Be sure to state that there is no one, final, definitive autobiography, for the client may reinterpret his/her life in many ways, from different perspectives, and at different points of time in life (thus alluding to dialogical self and multiple I-positions). This statement opens the way for deconstructing extant and maladaptive life themes, and co-constructing new life themes that foster career adaptability. Have a print copy of My Career Chapter to hand, show each page to the client and summarise the instructions. It is most important to discuss the diagram of the Systems Theory Framework of career (Patton & McMahon, 2014) to advise the client that career is more than one's interests, skills, and knowledge, so as to emphasise all of the various influences on career. Provide the client with a print copy to take home or send an electronic copy with a request that he/she return the completed manuscript for discussion in the next session.

**Step 1.** First the client completes a short list of questions pertaining to the influences on his/her career. These questions are posed as a "Warm-up Exercise". Their purpose is not to gather facts; instead, these questions focus the client's attention on the task of preparing to write.

**Step 2.** As My Career Chapter's other major theoretical foundation is the STF, the client commences an exploration of all of the influences identified in the STF in task titled "Pondering the Big Picture of Career". Accordingly, a picture of the STF is included in booklet alongside the instructions. The client is instructed to think about the influences depicted in the diagram and write brief notes.

**Step 3.** To further explore the dynamics of career influences, the client is instructed to rate the "Compatibility of Personal and Social/Environmental Influences". Using a simple rating scale (i.e., -2, *very much incompatible*, to 0, to +2, *very much compatible*), the client enters score into a grid with the personal influences (e.g., skills, abilities, values) listed down the left margin and the social influences (e.g., workplace, peers, family) listed across the top margin. This activity aims to help the client consider the range of influences that affect one another and to prepare for thinking about taking an I-position on any one of those influences.

**Step 4.** Here the client begins "Writing the Manuscript" proper. The manuscript comprises sets of sentence-stems with each set representing a career influence in the STF. Each set comprises five sentence-stems: one past tense, present tense, and future tense stem; one stem that addresses emotion; and one that addresses the influence's impact. Using the career influence of age as an example, the client would complete the following stems:

- When I was younger...
- My age allows me to...
- By the time I reach retirement I want...
- I mostly feel very positive / positive / indifferent / negative / very negative in relation to my age because...
- My age has a very positive / positive / neutral / negative / very negative impact on my careerlife because...

The final two stems require the client to rate their level of emotion and the influence's impact on career.

**Step 5.** This important step facilitates dialogue between I-positions under the heading of "Proof Reading to Yourself and Back Again". Now the client takes an I-position of his/her current self and, across time, an I-position of a his/her younger self. First, the client, in present sense, reads aloud the manuscript written in Step 5 to his/her self, imagined five years younger. Clients may use a photograph or some other object to assist in imagining himself/herself. Having heard the story, the younger self is invited to write comments to the older—current—self in regards to how life evolved (e.g., surprises, interesting changes). Finally, the current self, having listened to feedback from the younger self, completes the manuscript in Step 6.

**Step 6.** Now the client summarises the manuscript with sets of sentence-stems focused on Strengths, Obstacles, and the Future.

**Step 7.** The client is invited to write reflections on the process in preparation for reading the manuscript aloud again with a trusted confidante (e.g., counsellor).

**Interpretation.** Upon returning the manuscript to the next counselling session, the counsellor reads the manuscript aloud so as to allow the client to further reflect on his/her words. While reading, the counsellor may highlight important influences and connections among themes that emerge in the story. There are different ways to interpret My Career Chapter (e.g., McIlveen & du Preez, 2012). What matters most in the interpretation of the manuscript, is that the counsellor holds true to the notion that the story is just one of many possible stories that could be written by the client and that together, the client and counsellor engage in collaborative co-construction of the story and its meaningfulness to the client.

**Other helpful hints:**

My Career Chapter is supported by research into the experiences of use by clients (McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2008) and counsellors (McIlveen, 2007; McIlveen & Patton, 2010; McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2007). An independent review by Bayne (2013) appears in *A Counselor's Guide to Career Assessment Instruments*.

My Career Chapter may be used in conjunction with other narrative procedures that focus on life stories, particularly those of a similar theoretical foundations, such as the My System of Career Influence-Adult Version (e.g., McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2013) and tools used to assess dispositional traits or adaptive characteristics (e.g., values, interests).

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