A test for theoretical integration: Systems Theory Framework and Dialogical Self

Peter McIlveen

Queensland University of Technology

Corresponding Author:
Peter McIlveen
Student Services
University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba 4350
AUSTRALIA
+61 7 46312375
+61 7 46312880 (fax)
mcilveen@usq.edu.au

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Abstract

The Systems Theory Framework (STF) is presented as an integrating and organising concept for the predominant theories of career. In order to test the integrative capacity of the STF, a theory of personality, the Theory of Dialogical Self, is merged with the STF's theoretical element of story. Implications for the practice of career counselling are discussed along with a working example of a career assessment procedure informed by the STF and Theory of Dialogical Self. It is concluded that whilst the integration of the two theoretical bodies was successful according to epistemological criteria, there remains scope for integration with theories based upon varying epistemological and ontological assumptions.

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The Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006) is a comprehensive heuristic through which the multifarious influences that go to make up a person's career can be conceptualised. A purported benefit of the STF is its inherent capacity to subsume or integrate with different theories of vocational psychology, particularly those described by Patton and McMahon in their summary of theories focused upon content *influences* of career, those focused upon process *influences*, and those combining content and process. For example, in their most recent formulation of STF, Patton and McMahon (2006) added the emergent Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2005) to the group of constructivist theories that may be organised by STF. In addition to its value as a vehicle for theoretical work, the STF has been a significant conceptual aid for constructivist career counselling (McMahon & Patton, 2006), demonstrated by a number of pragmatic constructivist procedures emanating from its tenets (e.g., McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005; McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock, & Hjertum, 2003; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005). Notwithstanding the achievements of the aforementioned scholarship and practice, there remains scope to develop the STF's theoretical accounting for the generation of meaningful connections amongst the myriad *influences* identified within the system of a person's career and to thus elaborate upon STF's purported constructivist underpinnings. This conceptual paper addresses the STF with respect to its capacity for theoretical integration.

In order to test the STF's capacity as an integrative framework, in terms of the epistemological criterion of *generative theory* (Gergen, 1992) (i.e., the capacity to bring new theoretical vistas with pragmatic outcomes), this paper will propose that a theory of personality, the Theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), can be integrated with the STF, particularly in reference to its postulated element of *story*. Such integration would advance the STF's explanatory capacity. A constructivist ontology and epistemology are assumed from the outset of this conceptual task.

The crucible of convergence: The individual

From various theoretical perspectives, the psychological construct of self has been identified as a potential juncture for the integration of vocational theories (e.g., Bordin, 1994; Lent & Hackett, 1994). Indeed, the early psychological theory of Williams James' (James, 1890/1952) alluded to how the self, the *I*, brought coherence to the various *Me* states of an individual, which included one's occupation. In posing the preconditions for an answer to the question "Who am I?" with respect to career, and to posit a potential solution to the problem of theoretical convergence, Blustein (1994) argued that the notion of *embedded identity* required theorists to position a person's sense of self within the context of broader influences surrounding a person (viz. familial factors and sociocultural factors). In doing so, Blustein suggested that such an approach to career, identity, and the individual, would recognise the nexus of a person's psychological, social, and cultural worlds, rather than simply presenting a dissected view of the psychology of work and career (cf. Blustein, 2006). The congruence between the STF and the notion of embedded identity is clear. The STF has the multifarious individual inextricably embedded in equally diverse interpersonal, social, cultural, economic and political influences. Furthermore, Blustein (1994) called for research into the psychological process by which self-knowledge is constructed amidst the myriad factors of an individual's world. The STF offers a promising response to that call.

Story provides a potential solution to Blustein's (1994) theoretical challenge of contextualising the individual. Story has been emphasised by theorists as a metaphor for understanding career (e.g., Bujold, 2004; Inkson, 2007) and so too has the process of storying in counselling practice (e.g., Cochran, 1997; McMahon, 2006, in press; Savickas, 2005).

Patton and McMahon (2006) posited *story* as a fundamental process of the STF. *Story*, in their formulation, is akin to story in the narrative approach to career counselling, in which a person, through narrative, makes meaningful sense of the *influences* in his or her life; that is, "through story, individuals construct their own meaning about experiences and their own reality" (Patton & McMahon, 2006, p. 222).

Nevertheless, the process of *how* individuals psychologically construct the stories of their various identities and careers is a relatively unexplored conceptual area within the theoretical corpus of vocational psychology. It is insufficient for theorists to merely purport that individuals construct and co-construct career stories and leave the assumption without further explication. Moreover, the theoretical possibilities are too exciting to ignore. Whilst Patton and McMahon (2006) have emphasised the role of *story* in the STF, there is scope to further explicate its theoretical composition. Hence, the STF may be augmented by the inclusion of, or convergence with, such a theorised psychological process within the formulation of its tenets. In order to address that issue, I now turn to *dialogical self* and advance an argument toward convergence of the STF and Theory of Dialogical Self.

Story and dialogical self: Work in progress

The Theory of Dialogical Self has been widely articulated by Hubert Hermans (1996, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004, 2006a) and his colleagues (e.g., Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen, 1993). It has a significant presence with the counselling and psychotherapy literature (e.g., Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). It has also been the subject of special issues in scholarly journals (e.g., the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, *Theory and Psychology*, and *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*). Space limitations prohibit explication of the Theory of Dialogical Self in this paper; hence only the relevant core tenets are described herein. Given that convergence of the STF's theoretic element of *story* is the focus of this paper, it may be useful to introduce a literary metaphor for *dialogical self* prior to describing the relevant theoretical features of the Theory of Dialogical Self.

Hermans (2002b) metaphorically described *dialogical self* as an author who submits a manuscript to a scholarly journal. Having received comments from the journal reviewers, the author attempts to make sense of their criticisms and recommendations by engaging in a dialogue with their text. In order to make sense of the comments, the author attempts to read and understand the comments from the perspective of the first reviewer, thus taking on a different authorial position, and then returns to his or her original author position in order to integrate the two perspectives. The process is repeated for the position of the second reviewer, with the author returning back to the original position, of course now different because of the integration of the first perspective, and subsequently different upon integration of the second perspective. The cycling amongst perspectives continues and upon successive integrations the manuscript changes, and so on. Extend the journal submission metaphor; make the journal manuscript into an autobiography manuscript. Thus, the evolving formulation of person's autobiographical story, subsuming *career life themes* (Savickas, 2005), may be envisaged as process of a person constantly moving amongst different positions of perspective in life in order to build up a dynamic and meaningful narrative.

Hermans (2002b) described the dialogical self as a "dynamic multiplicity of *I-positions* in an imaginal landscape" (p.71) [my italics]. In dialogue—real or imagined—with individuals—real or imagined—a person inevitably attempts to grasp the meaning of the other's discourse and, to do so, takes the perspective of another *I-position* and, by doing so, reformulates the ongoing narrative of his or her life. This personal narrative is truly a work in progress embedded in the context of an individual's world, made up of the real and the known, and the unreal and unknown.

Hermans' (2002b) metaphor of an "imaginal landscape" (p. 71) provides the opening for an excursion into merging the multidimensional theoretical structure of the STF and *dialogical self*. Hermans (2002b) graphically represented the *dialogical self* as a field of interconnected, moving dots, which represent I-positions, some connected and some not. A person's I-positions may be internal, with reference to parts of one-self (e.g., I as mother), or external, with reference to others or parts of the environment (e.g., my friend). The field is divided by a permeable frontier with two semi-circles, one half consisting of internal and the other external positions; with I-positions exchanging dialogue with one another at any moment in time. Salient positions are up-front and toward the frontier between internal and external; quiet and unheard positions are diminished and distal. This variation in salience parallels the (discontinuous) change in predominance of STF influences.

Hermans (2003) also commented that the boundaries between domains of positions may vary or be permeable as a condition of the postmodern world. The parallel between Hermans' model of dialogical self and the STF is striking, with each position being represented by an influence within the STF at a particular point in time. The semi-permeability of influences, graphically represented by Patton and McMahon (2006) as broken boundary lines around each influence, likewise parallels the permeability of the I-positions identified by Hermans. This permeability highlights the diffuse contextual nature of self, as "there is no essential difference between the positions a person takes as part of the self and the positions people take as part of a heterogenous society" (Hermans, 2002a, p. 147).

A person may take an I-position of any influence within the STF. An I-position may be within the *individual system* (e.g., gender, I as a male), within the *social system* (e.g., family: I as father, brother, or cousin), or within the *environmental-societal system* (e.g., socioeconomic status: I as middle-class mortgagee). A person may also take I-positions of influences that are "external" and personalise them possessively as "mine". Using the previous influences as examples, one can take I-positions of my father, my brother, my cousin, my social class. As these external influences are brought into possession by the I, the (Cartesion) distinction between the "internal" and "external" psychological worlds are diminished. By thus decentring identity, Hermans modified the profound question "Who am I?" to be "rephrased as 'Who am I in relation to the other?' and 'Who is the other in relation to me'?" (2003, p. 104). The individual can thus achieve identity only through dialogical relations with influences of the "other" and the "outside" (cf. Buber, 1958/1923; Ricoeur, 1992) even when the other is another part of oneself (i.e., influences of the individual system) which has been objectified and possessed (e.g., my self-confidence) or subjectified (e.g., I as a confident person).

Meaning is generated when an individual moves from one I-position to another (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen, 1993). Hence, as a person speaks from the perspective of one STF *influence*, taken as an I-position within his or her systems of influences, then speaks from another position, then combines the dialogue of both, meaning is created. With successive movements between positions and dialogue amongst positions, the depth and breadth of a person's story increases. Rather than speaking from a single (potentially attenuated and undifferentiated) *I-position*—take vocational traits for example—a person can construct layers of his or her story by speaking from alternative I-positions such as disability, sexuality, ethnicity and so forth. A career story constructed upon the perspectives of multiple influences is a far more elaborate and meaningful account than a simplistic typological account (e.g., "I am an ABC type, therefore XYZ occupations suit me"). STF and Theory of Dialogical Self thus capture the decentred multiplicity of the individual who is contextualised by the environment through which he or she exists as an identity. The notion of identity as being embedded (Blustein, 1994) can be thus illustrated as dialogical self moving across I-positions within the myriad systems of influences.

Dialogical self and career counselling

Hermans (2006b) identified three forms of disorganised self-narrative that are of clinical interest: *barren narrative*, *cacophony*, and *monologue*. In career counselling, the barren narrative would manifest as a client having little or no story of his or her career, nor knowing where or how to start exploring. The cacophony would manifest as vivid expression of competing career interests, responsibilities, and limitations, with limited coherence and loaded with contradictions. A monologue would be present as a fixed and immovable belief and career-decidedness, despite inherent disadvantages.

From the merged perspective of STF and *dialogical self*, a client who presents for career counselling with the typical presenting problem of being undecided about his or her career would be invited to participate in an exploratory process which has as its aim the thickening of a barren narrative or monologue, or clarifying the cocophony of his or her extant career story. This would not be an objective fact-finding mission for the purpose of vocational diagnosis. This entails a process of voicing all of the career *influences*, as *I-positions*, and thus giving text to each. The ensuing process of bringing the voice and text of the *influences* together reveals correspondence, irrelevance, or contradiction. The counsellor likewise brings his or her voice into the mix toward the shared co-construction of a new career story. From a narrative perspective, plots, themes and characters may emerge, be evaluated, reformulated, or recontextualised. This describes a process of constructing career in narrative (cf. Bujold, 2004; Savickas, 2005). It offers a theoretical solution to the question of how individuals construct their career stories in counselling.

The Theory of Dialogical Self underpins a range of counselling and assessment procedures; take for example, the Personal Position Repertoire (Hermans, 2001). This method requires a client to construct meaningful valuations for a range of internal I-positions (e.g., I as man, I as partner) and external I-positions (e.g., my mother, my work). These valuations are brought together to determine their correspondence or contradiction as grist for the psychotherapy. The process facilitates dialogue amongst positions toward a profound meaningful understanding of oneself at a particular location in time. It is repeated over the course of psychotherapy both as a vehicle of hermeneutic exploration and as an account upon which the client and counsellor may reflect to determine therapeutic change.

Engendering dialogue amongst the STF I-positions has been demonstrated in career counselling by the Career Systems Interview (McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock, & Hjertum, 2003). In this procedure, the client is encouraged to view his or her career from the position of different influences, through the process of a free-flowing semi-structured interview (Schultheiss, 2005). To thicken the story associated with an particular influence identified in the STF, he or she is facilitated to speak about how that story correlates with or contradicts other aspects of his or her career generated from other positions. The act of hearing his or her voice speaking the words of previously unexpressed or undeveloped stories (cf. McMahon, 2006) is considered a key process of the Career Systems Interview and is akin to Hermans' (2003) notion of *innovation* of dialogical self in which one position is brought from obscurity to the foreground of consciousness.

Written procedures such as the My System of Career Influences (MSCI) Reflection Activity (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005) and My Career Chapter: A Dialogical Autobiography (MCC) (McIlveen, 2006) achieve a similar dialogical process for clients, but through the additional experience of drawing and writing about the influences within their systems of influences. Before engaging in the autobiographical writing of their career story in the MCC, a client is required to "de-centre" his or her career influences by rating the compatibility or incompatibility of individual (internal) influences with social and environmental (external) influences. This procedure was based upon the idea of the matrix of internal and external I-positions within the Personal Position Repertoire. This preparatory

activity is followed by writing about each career influence in meaningful detail, entailing a statement of each influence's past, present and future, salience, and its emotional valence. Upon completing the manuscript, the client dialogues with himself or herself by presenting the story to a younger version of him or her self, and by seeking his or her feedback. Through this process the client not only decentres his or her career, but actively engages with aspects of himself or herself as "other", that is, another *I-position* in a particular period of time. MCC thus represents a working example of the deliberate and successful integration of STF and the Theory of Dialogical Self at the level of practice.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper presents an argument that the theoretical composition of the STF's process influence of *story* can be improved by converging it with the construct of *dialogical self*. Through the lens of the psychological construct of *dialogical self*, it is suggested that individuals act as autobiographers constantly in dialogue with their phenomenal world—real, unreal, known, and imagined. Through this dialogue with the "other", an individual builds up his or her story, plots, themes, and characterisations in relation to his or her career. Moving from the perspective of one influence to another, an individual composes a complex and meaningful story. Moreover, an individual co-constructs stories in context of the "other" situated amidst myriad career influences which are aptly defined by the STF. As such, it is concluded that the STF meets the epistemological criterion of theoretical *generativity* (Gergen, 1992).

Consistent with the spirit of theoretical convergence and transtheoretical integration (cf. Savickas & Lent, 1994), STF serves as a framework for career theories and career development practices from a range of theoretical traditions and disciplines. As such, the STF does not ostensibly privilege one theory of career over another. Whilst this is a laudable aim, there are ontological and epistemological questions that remain unanswered within the current formulation of STF (Patton & McMahon, 2006). For example, how can STF account for the tension between one school of thought which assumes realist ontology and another which assumes constructivist ontology? They are mutually exclusive. Alternatively, how can the STF account for the fundamental differences in the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the theories that fall within the conceptual groupings of mechanism, formism, organicism and contextualism? Patton and McMahon argue in favour of a contextualist epistemology for STF, yet allow for the accession of theories founded upon formist grounds (e.g., trait-and-factor). These questions require answers if the STF is to be advanced as a bridging, or indeed unifying, framework for theory.

McMahon and Patton (2006) emphasise STF as being a manifestation of postmodern thought and constructivism (McMahon & Patton, 2006). Therefore it would be useful to assess the STF against the themes of a postmodern epistemology of practice and the attendant criterion of *neopragmatism* (Polkinghorne, 1992). Thus, the solution to the ontological and epistemological incompatibility amongst the theories it subsumes, is not within the STF itself, but rather within the theorist, researcher or practitioner using the STF; for it is the user of the theoretical framework who brings it to bear upon his or her local situation and conceptual problems in order make sense for him or her. This approach would readily satisfy Polkinghorne's notion of neopragmatism.

Such a solution is good and well for the theorist with a proclivity for postmodern thought, but offers little inspiration for the theorist who holds a realist worldview and pursues the attendant science of logical positivism. The challenge for adherents of STF, and its capacity for theoretical integration, is to demonstrate the value it brings to theory, research and practice across diverse and disparate domains. This paper has partly contributed to addressing that challenge by demonstrating STF's capacity to subsume a theory of

personality which, although constructivist in orientation, has a significant dimension of empiricism in its rhetoric and methods.

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