

**An Overview of Research into My Career Chapter —
A Dialogical Autobiography**

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The constructivist narrative approach to career development has matured considerably in recent decades, and is now a legitimate alternative to traditional schools of thought and practice (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). Australian scholars and practitioners have certainly made a significant contribution to the advancement of narrative theory and practice (e.g., McMahan, 2006, 2007). Notwithstanding the vigour within the field, there remains scope to improve the applied research basis of narrative career assessment and counselling (McIlveen & Patton), particularly in relation to how narrative procedures have been developed and tested in the field: to demonstrate not only that they are useful and effective, but how they work in terms of process and users' experiences. This paper summarises a research project which investigated the development and testing of a new constructivist, narrative career assessment and counselling procedure: *My Career Chapter—A Dialogical Autobiography* (McIlveen, 2006).

An Overview of My Career Chapter

My Career Chapter is a career assessment and counselling procedure which facilitates clients' hand-writing a brief career-related autobiography. Procedurally, clients work their way through a printed booklet following steps and very specific instructions. The centerpiece of the booklet is a sentence-completion task through which a user writes about the many career influences identified in the Systems Theory Framework (STF; Patton & McMahan, 2006): personal influences (e.g., ability, age, personality, beliefs); interpersonal (e.g., family, peers) and social influences (e.g., workplace, education institutions); and broader societal and environmental influences (e.g., the economy, employment market). Clients write about a past, present, and future aspect of a career influence, in addition to the emotional value and impact of the influence. This sentence-completion process produces the bulk of the manuscript of the career autobiography.

In addition to the writing process, My Career Chapter entails a client's reading his or her story to himself or herself and then engaging in self-editorial process in which the client provides comments to himself or herself. It also entails the counsellor's reading the manuscript to the client, and then both engaging in co-constructive interpretative and editorial process. The procedure is heavily informed by theory, the STF, the Theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), and the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2002). The dual reading process in particular emphasises the notion of *dialogical self*; and the individual's identity is constructed in dialogical relations with oneself and others.

The Research Project

The research project explicitly set out to explore the *process* of using and experiencing My Career Chapter, in the context of process-oriented research into career assessment and counselling (cf. Whiston & Oliver, 2005). It would be unlikely that a single research project could do justice to the need for a full and comprehensive evaluation of My Career Chapter as a new career assessment and counselling procedure. Instead, the research endeavour set out to answer the following specific questions:

1. How was My Career Chapter developed?
2. How does it manifest and inform theory—pure and applied?
3. How do clients experience My Career Chapter in career counselling?
4. How do counsellors experience My Career Chapter?

In order to answer those questions, the research project entailed an overview of pertinent ontological and epistemological frameworks and paradigms for psychological

science (viz., contextualism, constructivism, and social constructionism), along with constructivist, narrative approaches to career counselling. The project initially presented My Career Chapter as an alternative procedure for narrative career counselling, yet one in need of intensive process-oriented research, so as to inform practice and address issues of theory. Six studies were conducted toward that end. The studies focused on the experience of the primary developer of the procedure (viz. myself), counsellors trained in its application, and clients who experienced My Career Chapter as a career counselling intervention. The studies have been summarised in the following paragraphs.

The Developer's Experience

The studies into the developer's experience of My Career Chapter provided the organic basis of its relationship to constructivism, and its historical and contextual development. In order to complete this task, I used the research method autoethnography (McIlveen, 2007b, 2008). The autoethnographic approach reflexively brought into the question the professional, socio-political entity of scientist-practitioner in vocational psychology (and the inherently subsumed entities of psychologist and career development practitioner). Those autoethnographic case studies brought a reflective view to the entire research project, so as to enable high level compliance with the principles of constructivist, qualitative research. The studies pushed my engagement with the research project to a further degree of reflexivity by drawing on myself as a source of experiential data to check the veracity of my claims about My Career Chapter's qualities as an assessment and counselling procedure.

The Counsellors' Experience

In contrast to the profoundly personal studies of my experience through autoethnography, the professional counsellors' experience of My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2007a; McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2007) presented an objectified and critical account of My Career Chapter's relationship to theory and the recommendations for qualitative career assessment and counselling procedures (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003)—from the counsellors' perspectives. The counsellors' opinions affirmed My Career Chapter's alignment with those recommendations. Furthermore, the studies fully engaged the participants to an extent that they were able to offer suggestions for the modification of My Career Chapter to better enable its application in career counselling.

The Clients' Experience

To complete the circle of the research project, two studies investigated clients' experience of My Career Chapter. The first study (McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005) tested a pilot version sentence-completion section of the procedure and found that clients experienced no significant negative reactions, thus providing an important body of evidence that the procedure presented low psychological risk. Moreover, the study found that there was a mild positive emotional reaction to completing the task, along with tentative evidence of clients' tending toward positive change with respect to career counselling. This study also revealed areas in which the procedure could be improved. The final study investigated clients' experience of the full version of My Career Chapter. Results of this intensive study indicated that clients were able to use My Career Chapter as a reflective procedure with positive impact upon their emotional state and self-awareness. The study also confirmed that My Career Chapter presented no significant risk of psychological harm to client-users.

Future Research and Development

Having investigated My Career Chapter's process features and how it is experienced by users, the next phase of its development is to investigate its impact upon clients in terms of

outcomes. There is tentative evidence of it'd producing positive outcomes for clients (McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005), but there needs to be a range of specific investigations—perhaps comparing it with similar procedures, such as the My System of Career Influences reflection activity (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005). Furthermore, there is a pressing need to develop a computerised version for online application; after all, hand-written manuscripts may not be appropriate for users who prefer the speed and flexibility of a keyboard. Although My Career Chapter was originally designed for work with adult clients, the second study into counsellors' experiences (McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2007) tentatively indicated its applicability for adolescents. The training programme for counsellors is sufficiently tested and will be delivered in various formats in the future.

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