

## Constructing careers: actor, agent, and author

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When individuals seek career counseling, they have stories to tell about their working lives. The aim of career construction theory is to be comprehensive in encouraging employment counselors to listen for a client's career story from the perspectives of actor, agent, and author. Taking multiple perspectives on career stories enables counselors to offer clients a fitting intervention, whether it is vocational guidance for action, career education and coaching for agency, or career counseling to construct meaning.

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When individuals seek career counseling, they have stories to tell about their working lives. The stories usually tell how they have been dislocated from an occupational plot that they had been pursuing or about how they have completed a chapter in their career stories and need to turn a new page. Clients seek assistance from employment counselors to overcome the writer's block or narrative confusion that they experience as they move into the next chapter of their career story. Once counselors understand the narrative impasse, they help clients to rewrite and retell their stories using interventions that repair, refine, and advance the occupational plot. However, before counselors decide how to intervene, they first serve as an audience for the career stories that clients tell, and they listen in a particular way.

### LISTENING FOR A STORY

Veteran counselors follow the advice of the novelist Eudora Welty (1983)—they *listen for* a story rather than *listen to* a story. Listening to a story means absorbing it by being passive and receptive. Listening for a story means actively discerning it and collaboratively shaping it. Employment counselors may choose to listen for a career story from just a single perspective. However, listening from multiple perspectives enables counselors to more deeply understand clients and what they seek. Listening for stories from multiple perspectives is a flexible and exploratory procedure by which counselors shift perspectives to learn more about clients and better understand their situations. Counselors change viewpoints to progressively focus a client's initial broad story on the central occupational plot and career theme. Career construction theory seeks to be comprehensive in encouraging counselors to listen for a story from three perspectives (Savickas, 2011). The three narrative threads that counselors listen for in a story are the client's behavior as an actor, striving as an agent, and explanations as an author. McAdams and Olson (2010), who first theorized these three perspectives on the story, explained the viewpoints as rooted in the evolution of a self during the first 2 decades of life.

### Actor

Beginning in infancy, the self performs as a social actor. Children enter the family drama and assume a role that is shaped to a large degree by cultural discourses. Infants and toddlers quickly come to understand the world of the family and its social discourse. They use the categories available to them (e.g., gender, race, class, birth order) to take their place in the

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family. Once they have assumed a particular position in the family, they view the world from that vantage point and forge a social identity that others may easily recognize. Family and friends recognize the toddler using the categories available to her or him to distinguish and describe an individual's personality (e.g., open, agreeable, conscientious, and extroverted).

In listening for career stories to recognize an actor, counselors use the categories available to them as professionals. They commonly use the vocabulary of distinctions and taxonomy of traits offered by Holland's language of personality types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Counselors ask themselves which type this actor resembles. This objective perspective for recognizing individual differences among actors rests on a perspective that looks for likeness and similarity. For example, interest inventories identify which occupational groups a client resembles, and Holland's (1997) Self-Directed Search identifies a vector of resemblance to six personality types. Using the principle of congruence, counselors then help clients appreciate that they should explore and enter occupations in which actors whom they resemble already thrive.

### **Agent**

As children enter school, they begin to set more distant goals for themselves. In upper elementary school these goals still may be short term, yet the actor as agent strives to accomplish things. This second perspective on career stories therefore centers on how the agent sets and seeks goals. Counselors focus on the process of an agent's self-regulation, not the content of an actor's behavior. The focus takes a subjective perspective on clients' motives and characteristic way of adapting to social expectations and developmental tasks. In doing so, counselors frequently apply vocational developmental theory (Super, 1990) or sociocognitive theory (Lent, 2005) because both concentrate on agency, that is, the means by which something is done.

From the perspective of agency, counselors listen for how clients regulate their own vocational behavior. In particular, in career construction theory, counselors are advised to listen for and foster four constructs: (a) concern about the transition being encountered and awareness of what must be done, (b) a sense of control over and conscientiousness regarding the tasks to be performed, (c) curiosity about possibilities and initiative in job search activities, and (d) confidence and self-esteem in coping with the transition process.

### **Author**

Society expects late adolescents and young adults to begin to integrate their action and agency into a unified life story and a unique identity. They must become self-conscious authors of the stories that they are living. From the authorial perspective, counselors listen for how a client is unique, rather than whom the client resembles. Career construction theory encourages employment counselors to take the narrator's perspective and listen for stories about self-making, identity shaping, and character arcs. To understand that the story is being both told and lived, counselors concentrate on making meaning from important incidents, recurrent episodes, self-defining moments, life-changing experiences, and memories that typify the life.

Counseling for career construction takes a specific approach to making meaning from the career stories that clients author. The Career Story Interview asks four questions to elicit micronarratives about the client's typical role, preferred action setting, current script, and favored self-regulation strategies (Savickas, 2011). Insight into a client's typical role comes from their description of role models whom they admired when they were young. Preferred action settings are identified by the places that clients find interesting. To identify a client's manifest (not inventoried) interests, counselors ask about magazines they read regularly and favorite television shows. The magazines and programs usually clearly reveal the occupa-

tional environments that attract the client. For example, a client of mine who was majoring in psychology wanted assistance choosing a graduate program. She said that her favorite show was *Boy Meets World* because it addresses serious life issues and making transitions with the help of a supportive family. She also liked to watch *American Idol* to see how people find their places in the world and transform themselves from everyday citizens to stars. Three years later she was working as an employment counselor and job coach. The third question in the Career Story Interview asks clients to retell their current favorite story, whether from a book or movie. This narrative reveals the script that clients seek to live in the next episode of their own career story. The fourth question asks clients to relate a favorite saying. The saying can be heard as the client's best advice to self right now.

It is remarkable how many clients intuitively know what they must do to bridge the transition they face. The counselor's job is not to interpret the stories but rather to help clients listen for the wisdom they are authoring in telling about the self and preferred setting, the script that they wish to live, and their own advice about how to begin to make a way forward. Counseling for career construction does this by reconstructing a "life portrait" for the client's consideration and then with that client coconstructing the next episode in her or his story.

## CAREER SERVICES AND INTERVENTIONS

The contribution of career construction theory is helping counselors to take multiple perspectives on clients and then to systematically apply the fitting career intervention, whether it is vocational guidance, career education and coaching, or career counseling. Depending on a client's request for assistance, counselors listen for the career story from one or more of the three perspectives just described. If the client simply wants academic advice or vocational guidance, then the counselor listens for the actor and uses the traditional technique of matching person to position or actor to role. If the client wants help in exploring, decision making, planning, or searching for a job, then counselors listen for the characteristic adaptations and then use techniques of career education and psychosocial coaching to increase agency. If clients want to engage in meaning making and identity shaping, then counselors listen for the story authored by self and use techniques of biographical reasoning and narrative counseling to advance the story that they are already living. A few clients may want or need all three career services.

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