

Self in Career Theory and Counselling: A Discourse Analysis Perspective

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### Abstract

A rapidly changing postmodern working world demands revised conceptualisations of the self. Recent scholarship in discourse analysis invites an investigation into how selves are constructed and fabricated within a complex matrix of social discourses, and how this may impact on the field of career counselling and development. This paper examines the self in career counselling and development from a Foucauldian discourse analysis perspective in terms of the self's situatedness in history, narrative, and power. In addition, counselling implications within a discourse analysis perspective are provided.

Key words: self, career, discourse analysis, Foucault, counselling.

### Self in Career Theory and Counselling: A Discourse Analysis Perspective

Self and identity are prominent terms in psychology in general and specifically in career development research and career counselling. Notwithstanding the empirical output of self and identity, Bingham (2001) and Salomone (1996) stated that there has been little theoretical development on the self in career psychology since Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, and Jordaan's (1963) seminal work, *Career development: Self-concept theory*. However, there have been recent conceptualisations from constructivist perspectives (e.g., Burr, 2003; Savickas, 2002) but comparatively little has been written on career perspectives of self such as social constructionism and discourse analysis (e.g., Burkitt, 2008; Burr, 2003; de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Rose, 1998).. Foucauldian discourse analysis is one perspective closely linked to social constructionism that may be useful in critically examining the self and power in relation to career development and counselling. Discourse analysis differs from most career theory and counselling approaches, as it places more emphasis than these approaches on the role of power in human communication. Discourse analysis states that much of career theory and terminology is constructed, rather than objectively discovered, to serve certain interests. Foucauldian discourse analysis also focuses on relational processes without a concomitant focus on internal cognitive processes, as is found in constructivism (Burr, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to comment on terminology of the self, to critically reflect on theoretical perspectives on the self in career development and counselling, and to present a Foucauldian discourse analysis perspective of interpreting the self, with reference to its career counselling implications.

### Terminology

According to Barnhart and Steinmetz (1988), the etymology of self and identity reflect stability, oneness, and sameness and so the notion of a coherent self has persisted. However, self and identity are not differentiated clearly and consensually in mainstream and postmodern career development literature. Blustein and Noumair (1996) pointed out that self and identity are ambiguous and best defined by the author, rather than one searching for definitive meanings. As the term *self* is commonly used by both discourse analysts and career counsellors, we shall use the term *self* in this paper. Perspectives from career literature on the self are now examined.

#### Self in Career Theory and Literature

A brief overview of self perspectives in career theory and career literature is provided.

##### (a) *Career Theory*

The self became especially prominent in the literature after Super's (1951, 1963) early conceptualisations. Super (1963) viewed the self as comprising personality traits and self-attributed characteristics. Super's (1984, 1990) later views included the self as changing according to certain developmental stages, with a view to the crystallisation, specification, and implementation of the self. He also stated that the individual can have many selves in relation to social roles. In his career choice theory, Holland (1985, p. 5) described identity as the "possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, and talent." Person-environment correspondence theory continues to view the self as bounded and dichotomous. For example: "Subjective reality consists of an "inner world" that is accessible only to the person and an "outer world" that is accessible also to other persons and forms the foundation of objective reality" (Dawis, 2002, p. 428). In her developmental theory of occupational aspirations, Gottfredson (2002) referred to the self-concept as having many elements, such as abilities, personality, gender, and values and that it is the "object of cognition (the "me"), but it also

reflects the person as actor (the “I”)” (p. 88). According to Cromby and Standen (1999), psychology’s historical and largely current construction of the self has an *I* (self as agent) and a *Me* (self as object), and that this arguably reflects the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, individual and culture. In the cognitive information processing approach (Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, & Reardon, 2002), the self is allocated computer metaphors, such as data files, cognitive algorithms, and databases, all of which portray the self as essentialist and mechanistic. Besley (2002a) argued that in early counselling practice, perspectives on the self were based on essentialist assumptions, such as *stages* of personal development and the development of a core, stable self, as seen in the aforementioned theoretical approaches.

There are also relational constructivist conceptualisations of the self. Savickas (2002) extended Super’s developmental approach calling it *career construction*. Savickas’ recent formulation continues to also subscribe to the essentialist aspects of trait-factor theory, such as personality, as found in Super’s (1963, 1984) earlier work. For example, the statement that “People differ in vocational characteristics such as ability, personality traits, and self-concepts” (Savickas, 2002, p. 155) retains the vestiges of trait-factor thinking. He also viewed the self as “personally constructed, interpersonally conditioned, and linguistically communicated” (p. 161), which implies an inner world with bi-directional communication rather than interpersonal construction, and refers to conditioning which has behaviourist overtones. To augment Savickas’ career construction, McIlveen and Patton (2007) described how the dialogical self is related to career and life themes and how people enact a process of self constructive storying. They presented the self as a psychological construct useful in narrating life themes. These constructivist views tend to differ from Foucauldian discourse analysis that emphasises the self as being interpersonally and culturally inscribed rather than psychologically constructed. While

the action approach to careers (Young, et al., 2002) is constructivist and emphasises the importance of context and narrative in understanding career development, it views action as comprising internal processes. Savickas (2008) stated that career theories have failed to account for the postmodern era of work and therefore new career theories and models are urgently needed to address the self.

*(b) Career Literature*

The importance of self knowledge in career development has been recognised since at least Parsons' (1909) career choice propositions. More recently, Blustein (1994) referred to an embedded identity as reflecting self knowledge that includes one's core values and beliefs. Blustein and Noumair (1996) referred to embeddedness as the interdependence between intrapersonal experience and social, relational, historical, and cultural environments but, like Law, Meijers, and Wijers (2002), also acknowledged the essentialist and "inner" perspective on the self. Later, Blustein, Schultheiss, and Flum (2004) took a social constructionist view when they suggested that one should focus on the self as relational, rather than as an objective self comprising measurable interests and skills.

Discourse analysts problematised individualistic conceptions of the self and extended the notion of the self as relational by introducing power, social control and self regulation in the self's construction. Grey (1994) reported on the regulative principles of career in the labour process of an accounting firm. Using case studies he found that successful applicants conformed to the organisation's demographic requirements (e.g., white, male, middle-class, 21 or 22 years old), dress and deportment expectancies, and certain personality requirements congruent with team work and reflecting enthusiasm and commitment. Surveillance continued in the form of performance appraisals aimed at assisting the individual, but which Grey interpreted as a

benevolent form of power. The emphasis was on docile, normalised, individuals suited to the organization's values. Savage (1998) reported on employment practices of the Great Western Railway in Britain from 1833-1914. He noted that the company focused on the construction of employees' selves through forms of inspection and control. This was achieved less through punishment and more through discipline via motivation and career promotion prospects. In this way employees learned to regulate themselves. McKinlay (2002) provided a Foucauldian account of Scottish banking during 20 years preceding 1914. He argued that the bankers' selves were embedded in networks of power and social control rather than being the possession of the bankers. He added that the workplace constituted the self to conform to the bank's moral project, resulting in what McKinlay referred to as the bankers' "dead selves" (p. 595).

While few explicit statements on self and identity have emanated from the career development literature in the past 45 years, self and identity research continues in the form of, for example, self-efficacy (e.g., Borgen, 2008), identity status (e.g., Nauta, 2007), vocational identity (e.g., Scott & Ciani, 2008), self-esteem (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Piccolo, 2008), and self concept (e.g., Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003), of which much research using these concepts views the self from positivistic and essentialist perspectives.

The career literature on the self seldom considers the power implications and formative aspects of social discourses as reflected on by Grey (1994), Savage (1998) and McKinlay (2002). More importantly, much of the literature does not self-reflect on how career theories are embedded in knowledge in the service of power and dominant social and political discourses (Russell, 1999) and in so doing seldom confronts socio-cultural discourses and interactions in which clients' selves are embedded. Following Foucault (1977, 1980), Sarup (1996) stated that questions of the self should be placed in the context of history, narrative and power and this will

be followed in this paper. In addition, counselling implications within a discourse analysis perspective will be provided.

### Discourse Analysis

Social constructionism is a school of thought that assumes a broad range of assumptions including, among others: a critical perspective toward the “obvious” and mainstream knowledge, an anti-essentialist stance, the view that language constructs knowledge, that meaning is social and does not reflect a universal reality, and that knowledge is perspectival and derived from relationships with others (Burr, 2003; Stead, 2004). Discourse analysis has been viewed as closely related to social constructionism (Burr, 2003), with Miller (2008) using the term “Foucauldian constructionism.” Discourse analysis places more emphasis than social constructionism on understanding power and politics in social relationships and on whose interests are being served.

Discourse analysis is not one clearly defined approach, as it has various schools of thought such as Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, Fairclough’s (1995) critical discourse theory, Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) interpretative approach, and Foucault’s (1972, 1977) post-structuralist approach. While there is much similarity between discourse analysis approaches, there are some differences. For example, Laclau and Mouffe’s approach focuses on the constant discursive struggle to have one’s preferred constructions accepted in a community. They view social relations and social structures as being solely constructed through discourse. According to Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), Laclau and Mouffe’s approach is arguably more abstract and less interactionist than most discourse approaches. Fairclough’s critical discourse approach (CDA) views discourse as only one of many ways to construct the world. For example, violence or natural disasters also play important roles. A major focus of CDA is how discourses



are drawn from many sources and formulated to construct social and cultural change. CDA differs from the approaches of Laclau and Mouffe, Potter and Wetherell, and Foucault, in that it remains sympathetic to Marxist views of discourse as maintaining unequal power relations in society, such as that found in gender, race, and social class.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) viewed discourses as “interpretive repertoires” and focused on how discourses are constructed (for example, concerning the self), for what purposes, and how such discourses support power. They believed that discourse is more than an abstraction as it leads to action. They were also interested in the ideological effects of discourse and in this way are similar to Fairclough but different from Foucault. Foucault balked at the term ideology as it arguably assumes that there is an unchanging truth rather than “regimes of truth” (O’Farrell, 2005).

Foucault was particularly concerned with social and political processes, such as power, that constitute the self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Foucault’s reflections on the self as being historically and narratively constituted, and his emphasis on power in social relations and its construction of the self, led us to employ Foucault’s perspectives in this paper. We provide a discussion of Foucault's ideas as pertaining to discourse and power. The term *discourse* in this paper will reflect a Foucauldian (1977) perspective, namely as an institutionalised way of communicating, in which objects or subjects are constructed.

A Foucauldian approach has provided a theoretical platform from which to launch a number of research studies exposing how discourses construct selves in the workplace (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). These organisational studies expose how discourses of, for example, the enterprise culture, racism, patriarchy and class, produce power/knowledge relations in which subjects are positioned, subjectivities are constructed, and bodies are disciplined. For

example, Tretheway (1999) explored how discourses impact on the body as a site of power so that women carefully manage and negotiate their embodied identities in a work context. Such careful identity footwork clearly has implications for the self.

### Self in History, Narrative, and Power.

#### *1. Self as Historical Construction.*

From a Foucauldian perspective, the self is deeply situated in history and culture. Foucault (1972) believed that studying the history of the present is important for one to know why such ideas and concepts were constructed and why they are in current use. In this way we can know how people are made describable, rather than assume that career research will discover the essence of the self. An examination of meanings of self across time reveals how the self is constituted in accordance with philosophical and cultural opinion, rather than self conceptions developmentally progressing and becoming more scientific, focused, and accurately portrayed. According to Savickas and Baker (2005) and Savickas (2008), the self becomes constructed as cultural meanings of the self shift from, for example, rural to industrial to service economies. The ensuing discussion reflects on how perspectives of the self are constituted and vary in historical time.

During the Enlightenment era of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of self was born from an emphasis on experimental methods, rational thinking and individuality. Self-sufficiency and personal liberty took precedence over dependence on royalty and the wealthy and such perceptions were fuelled by philosophers such as René Descartes (1596-1650) and John Locke (1632-1704). For example, Descartes' well-known dictum, "I think, therefore I am," firmly placed the self in the mind; the place where it was believed thought and reason began (Cromby & Standen, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century produced the Romantic era, which was a literary, intellectual and artistic reaction to the Enlightenment. Romanticism embraced a self of the senses, emotions, morals, and feelings. This was still an inner self but a self ostensibly in touch with nature; a self also found in psychodynamic thought and the unconscious (Gergen, 1991). Savickas (2008) noted that the view of the self in the U.S. and Europe at the time was that of *character* rather than personality, where people were urged to have a good, moral character toward others, family, and work. Romanticism continues to be found in career counselling expressions, such as a true self, self-fulfilment, and self-actualisation.

The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries heralded the industrial revolution and the grand modernist narrative. This was a Neo-Enlightenment phase that focused on reason, function, practical applications and the rapid developments of science. Logical positivism became the scientific touchstone and inevitably there were revised conceptions of the self. These included a search for an essential or core, discoverable self. The term character was replaced with personality. Here the *persona* was invoked as people had varying roles in domains such as family and work. This paved the way for matching personalities (or selves) with jobs (Savickas, 2008), as evinced in person-environment fit career theories.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the postmodern era with changing occupational environments requiring rapid processing of large amounts of information. This era included schools of thought focusing on language as “reality” construction (Burr, 2003; de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006), such as constructivism, social constructionism, and discourse analysis. These postmodern perspectives have engendered an awareness of how counselling and career psychology theories produce certain selves (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984) through the language they employ.

## *2. Self as Narrative Construction*

Rather than acknowledging the internal nature of the self, Foucault (1994) emphasised its construction in relationships. Foucault (1977, 1980) believed that selves are constructed through language and narratives. Narratives are people's accounts of their lives that include the work domain. Narratives give intelligibility and meaning to lives. The events are gathered around a plot to which life events are connected. The plot could be one of career decisions or career barriers and various events are used to explain these career narratives. An important aspect of the narrative is one of continuity and change, process rather than substance, and generally it has a beginning, middle, and an end (Bujold, 2004). Narratives are based largely on selective memories. The self is therefore constructed in such a way that there is a semblance of coherence and unity (McAdams, 1995) over time. When constructing self-narratives, people draw from the cultural narratives that are available to them in terms of plot, structure and characterisation. The narrative continually gets altered as new occurrences and interpretations of events get incorporated into the narrative. A narrative can thus be one of many possible narratives. Life transitions, such as accepting a new job, result in people constructing narratives of how this occurred and how this contributes to their selves. The narratives that are constructed (Bujold, 2004) are always richly imbued in a cultural realm. They are also dependent on others being willing to support these narratives. Therefore, conflicting narratives between a worker and co-workers on the worker's productivity on a job may need to be resolved through negotiation. Publicly sanctioned narratives can play a major role in the construction of our selves (Burr, 2003). The organizational context, for example, creates powerful narratives that serve as discursive resource used to make sense of the self and relationships with others (Gabriel, 2004).

Autobiographical discourses are present in people's accounts of their career development (e.g., Ochberg, 1988; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Bauman (2002) stated that such personal and autobiographical narratives are largely rehearsals of public rhetoric and what the individual has learned in discourse between people and through the media. People entwine their personal narratives around familiar cultural narrative structures available to them. Such mainstream cultural narrative structures could include internal personal qualities (attitudes, beliefs, values, personalities) that help constitute such views of individuals in search of self-actualisation, success, or their "true selves" in the world of work. A Foucauldian perspective views the self as not something to be "discovered," and therefore neither internal nor external, but that which is co-constructed with others. It may also be important to recognise that career theories embody discourses in a historical era that are powerful in forming selves, as these have been granted power by social discourses that prioritise professional discourses of the person.

### *3. Self and Power*

Power not only emanates from hierarchical power structures, but primarily through discourse (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1977; Hansen, 2006; Hook, 2007). Foucault did not view power as a possession, a capacity, or the property of people, socio-economic classes, or institutions, but rather as a complex matrix with its threads extending everywhere. Foucault did not ask "Who has power," but "How are people constituted by the effects of power?" He might also have asked, "How do career psychology terms, such as career, personality, self-efficacy, and career maturity get shaped by power?" No term is an objective universal given that is obvious to understand. Power is also productive as it creates knowledge and so power and knowledge are sides of the same coin (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980; Hook, 2007).

Through discourse, power is transmitted and power in discourse serves to provide coordinates of how people are situated in a social relations matrix. To construct a self, one needs to determine how it is positioned in relation to the *other* (Hook, 2007). Sampson (1993) believed it is the construction of a *serviceable other* that is necessary to construct selves. Serviceable others can be heard but only insofar as they respond in appropriate forms to the dominant group. The process constructs both a dominant self (e.g., male, white, white collar, middle SES) and a serviceable other (e.g., female, black, blue collar, lower SES). This is a form of categorisation, of inclusion, partial acceptance, or exclusion, but nevertheless a self that is constituted through others.

Individuals also incorporate the gaze of external authority and participate in their own subjugation, their own self-policing or government of their selves. Self-policing is a Foucauldian term (Rabinow, 1984) and it focuses on the power of self-policing in the Western ethos. The ultimate form of surveillance is one of efficiency and effectiveness aimed at ensuring regularity in behaviour, namely self-control or self-surveillance where one attempts to fit into the norms of society. The gaze in Bentham's panopticon (a hypothetical tower where guards can view the incarcerated, but where the prisoners never know when they are being observed) becomes a self gaze and also with it awareness that one is responsible for one's own actions, be they good or bad. For Foucault (1977), the panopticon represents the way power functions in modern societies. The individual is observed, studied, diagnosed, and statistically documented more now than before the Enlightenment era, and with such emphases came disciplinary forms of power aimed at the individual (Hook, 2007; Miller, 2008; Sarup, 1996). Thus the discourse of traditional career counselling, such as categories, labels, and diagnoses, carries power to treat clients as individual objects of information rather than as co-constructing subjects.

This modern practice of power can constrain a person's sense of self with the incorporation of self-blame and the destructive consequences it may produce. Such normalisation is maintained through discourses between individuals and it is here where power becomes most effective. Normalisation is thus found in the rules of discourse, whether it be at work or among friends. Career research and counselling produce knowledge that makes it possible to think of desired social objectives, such as self-knowledge, productivity, contentment and self-improvement, and counsellors are granted the power to prescribe ways of acting and being. Individuals incorporate these ideals through self-policing and those who fail to meet them fall outside the norm (Rose, 1990), thus becoming the other. This may then become incorporated into an individual's self through processes of self-discipline. This is in line with Foucault's (1994) concept of "technologies of the self" where individuals internalise societal norms. Power may be seen as enabling and benevolent as it assists individuals to adjust to and function within societal and organisational expectations. Work adjustment is a common term in career psychology and is often used in the context of the worker benefitting from assistance (Dawis, 2002). Individuals become shaped and are expected to ultimately shape and regulate themselves. But individual freedoms become a contradiction in that there is freedom within the confines of norms but the individual is ultimately subjugated. As Rose (1998) pointed out, one may note psychology's prominent role in this process. This is part of the psy-complex, which is the complex network of theories, concepts and procedures where psychological discourse regulates how people think and behave (Rose, 1985), thus creating what Foucault (1977) referred to as docile bodies. The congruence sought between a person's personality and the personality required in an occupation (i.e., person-environment fit), which is present in many career theories such as those of Savickas

(2002), Holland (Spokane, Luchetta, & Richwine, 2002), Gottfredson (2002), and Dawis (2002), reflects the enabling and benevolent but normalising function referred to above.

#### Criticisms of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

It could be argued that Foucault's work presents a contradiction in that he implicitly makes truth claims regarding his own views on power/knowledge, thus promoting a dominant discourse resulting in disciplinary practices. Thus there are risks in applying discourse analysis, especially with the purpose of social change or intervention (Willig, 1999). Often the very attempts at empowering those who are disempowered by discourses (i.e., serviceable others) may have the opposite effect, as these attempts may mask other unequal power relations. For example, discourse analysis research may be employed to further entrench certain dominant discourses in the workplace. However, Willig offers ways to overcome these risks. One is to expose discursive practices rather than design specific empowering interventions. Another is to encourage practices that offer spaces of resistance to dominating discourses. This would imply employing discursive principles in reflecting on research and counselling practices in terms of their power implications.

Another criticism of a Foucauldian framework is its lack of emphasis on personal agency, as subjects are often viewed as "being created by" discourses (Newton, 1998). McNay (1992) noted how Foucault's later work emphasised the self's autonomy and agency rather than docility and passivity in the face of technologies of domination.. Foucault emphasised that resistance and power are inextricably linked. Discourses do not determine things, as there is always a possibility of resistance and indeterminacy (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). The co-existence of multiple, overlapping and contradictory discourses, opens spaces for resistance, including liberating constructions of self. Career counselling could become a space where such



constructions could emerge. We now turn to discourse analysis in relation to the self and career counselling.

### Self and Career Counselling

A Foucauldian perspective on the self may have important implications for counselling, as demonstrated in the work of certain social constructionist and narrative therapists (e.g., Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990) and applied in career counselling (e.g., Brott, 2001; Bujold, 2004; Locke & Gibbons, 2008; Stead & Bakker, in press). Besley (2002b) specifically referred to Foucauldian counselling implications among youth. Evidence for the efficacy of narrative therapy is reported in Etchison and Kleist (2000).

Applying Foucauldian principles to career counselling does not necessarily imply developing a new counselling approach with specific techniques. An awareness of discourse and how it impacts on the self may be applied in many different ways in counselling. For example, Morrell (2004) worked with social scripts that impact on clients' beliefs of career success and Williams and Irving (2002) pointed out how the client may experience difficulties when negotiating the contradictory demands of discourses. These studies demonstrated the advantages of an awareness of discourse on the part of the counsellor. Discourse analysis provides useful ways of reflecting on practice, regardless of the counselling approach used. However, few counselling approaches explicitly address the issue of power when addressing discourses and the self. The following are examples of how an awareness of a discursive view of the self would impact on counselling.

#### *1. An Awareness of the Politics of Language*

The conventional use of the English language promotes a binary view of the person, as in "I am ambitious" or "I am not ambitious." Through naming and defining, a separate autonomous

*I* is brought into existence. Counsellors may search for ways to expose how these meanings are contextually situated and how to escape such binary descriptions of individuals. The challenge becomes to support clients to perceive and explore selves as contextually created, while restrained by the conventional use of language which creates and imposes a sense of self as fixed, autonomous and separate (Bird, 2004). If, in contrast, we assume that all language is metaphorical and that metaphors carry power, we could apply deconstruction in investigating the relational implications of various metaphors in clients' lives. This could open space for personal agency and choice.

One way of meeting the challenge of the politics of language as metaphor, is through the deconstruction of dominant discourses in clients' lives and developing thick rather than thin descriptions of people's selves. Thick descriptions involve the articulation in fine detail of some story lines of a person's life or self including motives, histories and understandings. Counselors are interested in finding ways for alternative stories of people's lives to be richly described (White, 1997). Psychological terms, such as career adjustment, career personality types, and career development stages, may reinforce thin self-descriptions. It is arguable that some career counselling practice underscores expert, evaluative and normalising judgments, thus urging us to conform to cultural expectations. Career counselling cannot escape its cultural and normative imperative (Stead, 2004). To the extent that people believe that these expectations are necessary to their well-being and accept these so-called truths, they also limit their options. White conceived of counselling as assisting the client to develop thicker descriptions, which may open or refine possible career choices.

Another way of meeting the challenge of the limitations of conventional language and explore language as metaphor, would be to externalise problems and ideas, and listen for

exceptions to problematic narratives and ideas, including self-descriptions (White & Epston, 1990). Dominant problem saturated descriptions of people's selves and work lives, which carry disciplinary power, may be externalised through using language in such a way that the problem becomes separated from the person and contextualised in a discursive context. A hypothetical example would be:

Client: I have always been a shy person so I have never pushed myself or my ideas forward enough to get promoted.

Counsellor: So shyness has stood between yourself and your goals?

Client: I guess you could put it that way.

Counsellor: Tell me a little more about the role of shyness in your life... Can you think of a recent event that stands out for you in that you feel shyness played a big part in it?

In this example the counsellor is initiating an exploration process that separates the person from the "shyness". The conversation could develop to a point where the counsellor finds an exception (a unique outcome) to the powerful role that "shyness" has played in the client's work life and may highlight it:

Counsellor: So, for a brief moment, shyness retreated and you discovered you spoke out for yourself!

Client: Yeah, somehow I became so involved in listening to the other people in the meeting struggle with the planning that I spoke out before I even realised that I had spoken.

This conversation could potentially develop towards new self descriptions. The "shyness" is now less rigidly attached to the person's self and the possibility exists that other, more preferred descriptions could also enter into the client's self-descriptions, or, alternatively, that "shyness" may change its meaning for the client.

Another way to meet the challenge of the limitations and politics of language is through the development of relational language, as in the work of Johnella Bird (2004). Externalising a problem becomes difficult if the self is identified as the problem, as in “I am useless, ineffective, unambitious.” Bird thus works with separating the person from any descriptive metaphors that are central to their self-understanding, believing it to be important to develop a consensual understanding of the experience of clients in relation to these and other descriptions. She creates linguistic distance between so-called character traits and the self, and then contextualises and *re-searches* (Bird, 2004, p. 9) this relationship. For example, if a client describes himself as an ambitious person, the counsellor may inquire as follows: “This ambitious position which you have taken up, when did you first become aware of this position?” Or “this determination to achieve that you mentioned; what or who supported this determination? Did this alter or change over time?” Creating linguistic distance in this way, opens space for alternative metaphors to develop in terms of the client’s self-description. In Foucauldian terms, it opens resistance to a dominant discourse.

The aim is to examine metaphors in terms of how they impact clients’ relationships and sense of personal agency, rather than merely assuming an essentialist view of metaphors rigidly attached to a relatively fixed, unchanging self.

## *2. An Awareness of Power Relationships in Counselling*

The assumption that the counselling relationship itself carries power would normally be addressed through the supervision process. However, this assumption may also lead counsellors to new practices to ensure that power is not abused. The counsellor would guard against imposing meanings on clients. Rather than bringing professional categorisations to people, such as using a theoretical understanding of self-esteem as a point of departure, the counsellor would

develop an understanding of how the metaphor of self-esteem functions in a person's work domain. Bird (2004) would thus develop questions around, for example, the client's knowledge, practice, history, notion, or sense of self-esteem in various work situations. White (1997) addressed the challenge of power in the therapeutic relationship through practices such as therapist de-centering, with related notions of re-membering conversations, transparency and taking-it-back practices. Through these practices the client and the client's relationship with significant people in the client's life take central stage, rather than the therapist or the therapeutic relationship.

An awareness of power relationships also has implications for the role of professional knowledge in counselling. If theoretical terms are temporarily set aside in favour of developing consensual meaning together with clients, there are then implications for the relationship between the counsellor and the traditional tools of the trade. These include career theories and assessment instruments. A discourse analysis perspective does not demand that these be left behind. Instead, they may be viewed and used differently by becoming more supportive and less central to the therapeutic process. This is a natural outflow of viewing them as systems of meaning or metaphors that are situated within professional discourses. Their meaning is thus not fixed but will evolve differently in conversation with every different client.

### *3. Re-positioning the Counsellor*

The counsellor avoids being positioned as a truth-holder and would attempt to avoid the professional gaze, as this gaze is discriminatory when it falls on the marginalised or the serviceable other (Sampson, 1993). The so-called objective observer position is avoided. The therapist becomes a co-researcher, a facilitator or co-author of alternative and preferred knowledges and selves. There is a move from observing others (clients) to investigating, together

with clients, relationships with meanings, metaphors, narratives and self-descriptions, often while exposing their power in terms of their impact on the clients' lives. This would include those metaphors the counsellor brings to counselling, such as career theories or test results.

White (2002) described the position of the counsellor as decentred and influential. The notion of a decentred position implies that the counsellor becomes less central in the counselling process, as priority is accorded to the personal stories, knowledges and skills of clients, who attain primary authorship status in the process. However, the counsellor is still influential, but not in the sense of delivering interventions. According to White, the influence of the therapist resides in creating a context of questions and reflections, that make it possible for clients to (a) richly describe alternative, more preferred stories of their work lives and selves, (b) explore some of the neglected territories of their work lives and selves, and to (c) become significantly acquainted with those skills of their lives and selves that are relevant to addressing their current work concerns.

The above counselling applications are a few examples of how counsellors may reflect on their work by developing an awareness of the discursive context of views of the self. By temporarily putting aside traditional ways of understanding self, counselling may become a liminal space (White, 1995), where beliefs are suspended or seen in a new light, enabling a "migration of identity" (p. 101) and preferred selves to emerge. Similarly, counsellors may temporarily suspend their own terms of reference and hold these up for scrutiny in terms of the real effects they have on their work and professional identities.

### Conclusion

Career psychology needs to consider its largely essentialist and positivist notions of the self. This is in keeping with Savickas' (2008) call for counsellors to keep pace theoretically with

a radically changing postmodern working world. It is a world that is moving beyond a positivist view of the self (i.e., a system of discoverable rules and truths underlying the self). Foucauldian discourse analysis radically transforms positivistic and essentialist perspectives from those with seemingly self-evident counselling terminology and psychological categories, to those in which these terms and categories appear to be constructed to serve certain purposes. This is a difficult paradigmatic shift for counsellors, who may assume that counselling psychology has at least some self-evident and stable concepts on which to base their research and practice. Discourse analysis also aims to shift counsellors' views from valuing internal conceptions of the self to relational ones (Miller, 2008; Rudes & Guterman, 2007). White (1997) cautions us not to be "unwitting accomplices in the reproduction of the dominant and culturally sanctioned versions of identity, of the popular and revered forms of personhood, of the most familiar and mainstream subjectivities" (p. 227). This places new demands on counsellors and may also offer liberating alternatives to existing practices.

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