

Narrative counselling with a young engineer

Jacobus G. Maree* and Erna W. Gerrys

Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

**Corresponding author email, Kobus.Maree@up.ac.za*

This case study applied a narrative approach to develop the sense of self as a career resource for a young male engineer in his first working year. The participant client attended eight sessions lasting 60 to 90 minutes each over a period of five months. The case sessional data were thematically analysed. Following the intervention, the participant displayed career strengths of willingness to deal with challenges, enhanced adaptability strategies and volition to elect preferred work setting. He also displayed an enhanced future orientation. Narrative counselling appeared to support career adaptability development.

Keywords: career adaptability, career development, engineer, narrative approach, professional development, sense of self

Introduction

Career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2005) proposes the use of narratives to identify and support work participation adaptability. From a CCT perspective, individuals choose and construct careers by deriving meaning from personal career experiences.

However, fundamental changes in the global economy are today providing new challenges for career counsellors and their clients. These challenges call for less 'objectivity' during career counselling and for more focus on the subjective careers of individuals. The dynamic perspective adds a narrative, psychodynamic approach to career counselling where patterns, themes and meaning are inherent and elicited from the individual's emerging life stories and experiences. Emphasis is also placed on the spirit and values that guide the choices and adjustments that build a career (Savickas, 2005). This subjective approach is linked to the individual's sense of self and exemplifies narrative counselling approaches (Maree, K., 2010).

The noun 'narrative' is derived from the verb to narrate or "to tell (as a story) in detail" (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) describes a narrative as the "focus on the studying of a single person through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual". Narration is a literary (Creswell, 2008) and popular (Nieuwenhuis, 2010) form of qualitative research that focuses on the micro-analytic picture rather than on the broader picture consisting of cultural norms and abstract theories.

Sense of self and adaptability in part are constructed around people's personal narratives. Sense of self refers broadly to self-concept, self-image, self-regard or self-perception. In the context of narrative counselling, Savickas (2011) says the more clients view their 'me', the more they develop their self-concepts. *Adaptability* is the "quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances" (Savickas, 1997). Career adaptability is defined as "the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions"

(Savickas, 1997). Adaptable individuals are also more employable than would have been the case had they not been adaptable.

[Employability involves] self-belief and an ability to secure and retain employment. It also means being able to improve ... [the worker's] productivity and income-earning prospects. This often requires competing effectively in the job market and being able to move between occupations as necessary. It requires 'learning to learn' for new job opportunities (Bridgestock, 2009).

Goals of the Study

This study sought to apply narrative counselling to explore the sense of self needs for employability in a young or early career engineer. Case narratives provide indicative evidence of the value of narrative counselling for employability.

Method

Case Description

Selection criteria called for a young working engineer with doubts about his career future. The participant, George¹, was a 25-year-old Afrikaans-speaking Caucasian male who grew up as an only child in an affluent home. He achieved two distinctions in Grade 12, gained South African colours in swimming and was a leader in his school years. He studied chemical engineering and at the time of the study was in his first year of work. He missed his friends after having to move from Gauteng Province to his work site. George¹ showed himself to be fairly ambitious and he expressed doubts as to whether his engineering degree would be sufficient should he need to change jobs in future. He therefore wanted to make himself more marketable and employable in his field.

Data Gathering

Data-gathering instruments. A multi-method, explorative, descriptive, single case study was used in the research. Narrative techniques were employed to develop the sense of self of a young engineering graduate in a new working

environment. We aimed to assess and gather data on the three perspectives (differential, developmental and dynamic) used in career construction theory (Savickas, 2005). An integrated, qualitative + quantitative approach was adopted (with the emphasis on the qualitative aspect of the approach), and a variety of data collection techniques and methods were used to collect and then analyse the data, including the techniques and measures indicated listed below:

- a. Differential perspective: *Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI)* (Briggs & Briggs Myers, 1994) and *Self-Directed Search (SDS)* (Gevers, Du Toit, & Harilall, 1995).
- b. Developmental perspective: *Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i)* (Bar-On, 2004), *Career Adapt-Adaptabilities Inventory (CAAS)* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) and *Career genogram* (Chope & Van Velsor, 2010; Di Fabio, 2010).
- c. Dynamic perspective: *Collage* (Fritz & Beekman, 2007), *Career Interest Profile (CIP)* (Maree, J.G., 2010), life chapters (Cochran, 1997), life line, early recollections technique (ERT) (Maree, 2013; Savickas, 2009, *Career Construction Interview (CCI)* (Hartung, 2011), informal interviews and reflective feedback notes.

Intervention

The intervention comprised eight distinguishable but interwoven sessions (Savickas et al., 2009; Maree & Crous, 2012). For the purposes of this article, we will focus only on the analysis and synthesis of narrative data. The presenting ‘problem’ was clarified first. Next, the primary researcher-counsellor and client identified what the client was hoping to achieve. Thirdly, the counsellor and client explored the client’s current sense of self (that is how the client saw himself and others in his idiosyncratic context and how he related to others and objects in that context). Fourthly, the counsellor and client explored new perspectives regarding the participant’s sense of self to enable the client to be more adaptable within his current career circumstances.

The intervention across eight sessions

The eight sessions were conducted over a time period of five months and mainly on Saturdays due to the participants’ work schedules. The first session was an introductory interview and evolved in an extensive discussion on the reason why George needed exploration of his future career. In the second session George compiled a *collage* (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) or visual representation of himself clarifying his sense of self at the time under the topic: *Who am I?* In the third session George was given the opportunity to make a schematic representation of his family in the form of the *Career genogram* (Chope & Van Velsor, 2010; Di Fabio, 2010), which was used to facilitate conversation. Sessions four and five were used to administer the *Career Interest Profile (CIP)* (Maree, J.G., 2010) and the *Life chapters technique* (Cochran, 1997). Session six was taken up by two quantitative assessments which are not applicable for the purposes of this article. In session seven the *Early Recollection Technique (ERT)* was conducted to explore the underlying motifs regarding

George’s exploration of himself. In session eight the format of Savickas and Hartung (2011) was used as a guide to conduct the *Career Construction Interview (CCI)*. This session was used as a meta-reflective (Maree, 2013) opportunity for George to advise himself as the primary expert on himself.

Data Analysis

The data from each session were organised according to categories, themes and subthemes (Table 1) which emerged from the data that were aligned with Career Construction Theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2005).

Ethical Issues

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. Informed consent was obtained from the participant after informing him of the purpose and consequences of participation. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were observed and measures to ensure the participant’s wellbeing and protection from harm were implemented throughout the study. The researcher gave feedback to the participant during all the phases of the research process. The research findings were released in an acceptable and responsible manner.

Results

Presenting problem and what the client wanted to achieve.

George was in his first year of formal employment. He started working at a large petrochemical engineering company in a new province. Because of a shortage in engineering positions in the company at that time, George was placed in a position as a technician doing physical work on the company’s operations plant which was different from his expectation and training as a chemical engineer:

It is physical work-not at all engineering work, ... it is a bit boring, it kills my soul..

Uncertain on where he ‘fits in’, George was also overwhelmed by the large structure of the new company

The company structure is very big and I don’t know where I ... would fit in

George wanted to come to terms with this work-role in the new company.

George also mentioned some difficulty in social adaptation to his new town:

I still struggle a bit to adapt in [name of the town].

His girlfriend and friends from university all stayed in Gauteng (the province where they studied). He hadn’t yet managed to make friends in the new town:

one of the reasons why I am a bit upset ... is because MY people are not there and I do not have other people there yet.

George was doubtful whether his chemical engineering degree would be sufficient to reach the goals he had for himself within the next ten years:

I have the degree and all now, but is it enough? ... Should I do more, should I do something different?

He also wanted to be able to change jobs in future if needs be and therefore wanted to be marketable and employable in his field:

I don't know what to study further. I don't know what to study if I decide to further my studies.

George wanted to prevent future failure by embarking on a further degree because he thought that his degree might not be sufficient for his future plans.

Description of How the Client Self-Perceived

Sense of self.

George is an only child and first generation graduate in chemical engineering. He had difficulty adapting to student life:

I struggle in new situations with new people whom I don't know

and staying in a men's residency at first. George also struggled academically in his first two years:

When I came to university I thought it would be like school but it wasn't like that.

He had to spend two extra years to complete his degree:

I failed three subjects in first year.

Apart from not knowing the academic standard and not being used to the amount of work in engineering, George suffered from low self-esteem and low confidence levels:

If I am uncomfortable I struggle and tend to be very shy',
'... I don't know if I am technically strong enough to solve that problem ...

George is competitive and had difficulty in positioning himself between his peers in first year in residence. George couldn't rely on former skills to get through that crisis stage. George went to a life coach in his second study year:

I went to a counsellor and told him ... I really don't know where I fit in (name of residence)

which helped him to a great extent:

the 'tools' the counsellor gave me ... If you feel bad ... start to seek until you can name it.

While administering the early recollections technique (ERT), it became clear that George had a pre-occupation with being successful and preventing failure at all costs from a very early age. Significant events in life motivated George to exhibit his identity through physical performance. George was an extremely successful swimmer at school. He had built his identity by winning galas and becoming the captain of the SA swimming team in grade 12. During the sessions George admitted that he didn't want to participate in competitive sports anymore. He had established himself physically and became a physically large man. The new work situation George found himself did not challenge him physically. He needed skills to develop strategies to establish a meaningful career. George's advice to himself (in his third early recollection) was to:

triumph through wisdom

George needed to define what a meaningful and purposeful career for him was. In the career construction interview (Savickas & Hartung, 2012,) George clearly stated that he was concerned about:

failure in myself and the disappointment of significant others which explains my strong motivation to achieve.

He wanted to become

a financially free person, an expert in work related knowledge and an inspirational leader.

George admitted to the realisation that

life is a process

and that he was committed to

enrichment, transformation, self-exploration and growth' for 'continuous upliftment and understanding.

The counsellor and client worked together on opening new perspectives by narrating George's story and reviewing his story.

New story. The 'old' story was subsequently 'located' in a new story, built on hope and respect, after which George was helped to write his vision and mission statement. The mission statement George wrote after the intervention was as follows: I will be most happy and successful when I am able to be

financially free and technically strong

in places where people

do hands-on technical problem solving activities so that I can grow and eventually have a good understanding of that environment and allow other people to grow in themselves

George was asked to revisit the reasons why he decided to follow the process. The first motive was to discover where he fitted into the company. When asked how he saw himself fitting into the company, it was clear that 'fitting-in' was not much of an issue any more due to his change from the technical division to the engineering division where he was a 'clear fit'. He was aware that he still had a lot to learn in his capacity as 'candidate process engineer' and needed to work really hard to learn as much as he could from the company.

George decided against going into business and finance due to the lack of people contact and the fact that jobs in finance are office bound. He grasped his interest in management as linked to his ambition to help others grow and develop.

George was requested to set goals for the short term regarding his future career path. He decided to stay at the company for the next 12-18 months and then try to move on. He also realised that the engineers he was working with often left after three to five years due to the lack of designing projects the company had to offer.

Lastly, George had to reflect on the areas in his life where he lacked confidence. He related his low confidence level to previous situations where he had failed. He could relate these situations back to having to prove himself on a physical level to distinguish himself from his peer group. Another area where he sometimes lacked confidence was on an academic level. He planned to master his perception of academic failure by furthering his studies in about three to four years' time. George proved himself to be an excellent employee. He by then had received a letter of appreciation and gratification from his line manager for being an asset to the company due to his ability to fit in with others and for having an excellent attitude.

In the concluding session, the counsellor followed up on how the client was doing after a period of six months. George reported that his

search for what I am and what I should do was very interesting.

He added that

[t]he intervention sessions we had definitely helped [me] to realise what my strengths are in my current situation ...I am focusing on these strengths ... and I will continue to build on these. I am also trying to address some of the pitfalls which came out of the sessions. I have also decided to be more relaxed and to give things more time. I think there are some things that I tried to rush a lot.

He also noted that

I have realised in my current job that I have much to learn still. Moreover, there are many opportunities in my present job that I can use to grow as an engineer. I am trying to grab these opportunities with both hands. There may also be some opportunities outside [the current company] but I will investigate those possible opportunities in the future.

Thirteen main themes emerged from the analysis of the narrative data as displayed in Table 1.

The main themes which emerged from the narrative data were family background, values, abilities, interest, personal traits, adaptation, challenges, coping mechanisms, pre-occupations, aspirations, work setting, script and self-advice. These themes are discussed and illustrated by the meaningful subthemes below.

Main Themes: Focus on the Narrative Data Only

The main themes and subthemes were categorised according to the three perspectives in career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2005). The *Differential perspective* (Category A) concerned the characteristics of the participant with fairly stable probabilities such as the participant's family background, values, abilities, interests and personal traits.

Family background. The career genogram and introductory session elicited facts such as that the participant (George) was the only child of parents who had been married for 15 years when he was born and that George grew up in a home with intact relationships and supportive parents. He was the only graduate in his family so far.

Values. From the first session, George portrayed himself as a value-driven person with clear views on what was important in life. He displayed strong ethical and spiritual principles that influenced the way he lived his life and also his view of and relationships with others. The CIP helped indicate the importance that George attached to achieving goals and earning enough money to support his own future family.

Abilities. The subthemes of this theme revealed George's self-perception and the identity he had created for himself through personal capabilities. The extensive discussions (introductory interview, collage, the CIP and the career construction interview) helped identify George's abilities. He earned national colours in swimming at a young age and his leadership skills emerged at high school and university. George graduated as a chemical engineer and showed himself to be a natural problem solver who enjoyed interacting with people.

Interests. The main interests that could be observed in George were entrepreneurship and business, cooking and hospitality, adventure and the outdoors, engineering and natural science as well as executive management. The CIP was particularly helpful in identifying these interests.

Personal traits. His sense of self was consistent with George's projected image as an achiever:

I realised through achievements you can get further in the company,

He was also hospitable, resilient, impatient, social and extrovert, flexible and emotionally involved:

it is difficult for me to ... just push the emotions aside to think rationally about things.

In the *Developmental perspective* (Category B), subthemes emerged that were acquired through life processes and which could change over the life span such as adaptation, challenges and coping mechanisms.

Adaptation. Subthemes supporting the process of adaptation for George were fitting in, his work role:

The [company name] structure is very big and I don't know where I will fit in

as well as work content and career path:

I am not fully sure where to, I'm not sure how and further studies and relationships:

I see that relationships can be a challenge when you work and when you are not a student anymore.

George also mentioned a lack of confidence:

When I am uncomfortable I struggle and tend to be very shy

as well as academic challenges and emotional control issues

I sometimes have a way to self-destruct ... I then can't get my thoughts aligned

as being the most demanding challenges in his life so far. He reported listening to music

It is my place where I think about things

and 'learning by doing' and counselling as *coping mechanisms* for dealing with life's problems.

Themes in the *Dynamic perspective* (Category C) indicated motivations in George that created a sense of meaning and purpose for him. The career construction interview (CCI) (Hartung, 2011) and the CIP (Maree, J.G., 2010) were extremely useful in revealing George's preoccupations, aspirations, desired work setting, life script and self-advice as themes in the dynamic perspective. Regarding his *preoccupations* (absorbing thoughts), George revealed concern about

failure in myself and disappointment of significant others which explains my strong motivation to achieve

Aspirations (hopes of the participant for certain achievements). It became clear in the CCI and CIP that George aspired to become financially free, to be a technical expert:

That there is one thing [technically] that would differentiate me ...

and to be an inspirational leader to others. He saw himself becoming

a financially free person, an expert in work-related knowledge and an inspirational leader.

Regarding *work setting* George made it clear that he wanted to be in places where people

do hands-on, technical problem solving activities where I can grow ...

In terms of a personal *life script*, George referred to the following life plans which he wanted to get to and which

Table 1. Summary of the identified themes and subthemes in the three different categories.

Category A: Differential perspective (embedded content within the individual with stable probabilities)	
Theme 1: Family background (relates to relevant aspects of the participant's family inherent in the participant's sense of self)	
1.1 Only child	Sessions 1, 3
1.2 Supportive parents	Sessions 1, 2, 3
1.3 First generation graduate	Sessions 1, 3
Theme 2: Values (relate to the judgement of the participant of what is important in his life)	
2.1 Achievements	Sessions 1, 5, 7
2.2 Money	Sessions 1, 5
2.3 Relationships	Sessions 3, 1, 5
2.4 Ethical and spiritual principles	Sessions 1, 2, 5, 8
Theme 3: Abilities (relate to proven skills of the participant identifying aspects of his sense of self)	
3.1 Swimming champion	Sessions 1, 2, 5
3.2 Leader	Sessions 1, 2, 3, 5
3.3 Chemical engineer	Sessions 1, 2, 5
3.4 Problem solver	Sessions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8
3.5 People skills	Sessions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8
Theme 4: Interest (relates to topics that excite the attention and curiosity of the participant)	
4.1 Business, entrepreneurial	Sessions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
4.2 Cooking	Sessions 1, 2, 3, 5
4.3 Adventure and outdoors	Sessions 2, 3, 4, 5
4.4 Engineering and the natural sciences	Sessions 3, 5
4.5 Executive management	Sessions 5
Theme 5: Personal traits (relate to habitual patterns of behaviour, thoughts and action that could be observed in the participant)	
5.1 Achiever	Sessions 1, 2, 3, 5, 8
5.1 Hospitable	Sessions 2, 3, 5
5.2 Resilient	Sessions 3, 5
5.3 Impatient	Sessions 5
5.4 Social	Sessions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
5.5 Not rigid/flexible	Sessions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6
5.6 Emotional involvement, dependency	Sessions 1, 5, 6, 7, 8
5.7 Extravert	Sessions 1, 4, 7
Category B: Developmental perspective (acquired through life processes that can change over a person's life span)	
Theme 6: Adaptation (relates to instances or situations where the participant indicated a transition process)	
6.1 Fitting in	Sessions 1, 2, 5, 7
6.2 Work role	Sessions 1, 2, 5, 6
6.3 Work content	Sessions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
6.4 Career journey	Sessions 1, 2, 6
6.5 Relationships	Sessions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8
6.6 Further studies	Sessions 1, 6, 8
Theme 7: Challenges (relate to issues referred to as demanding)	
7.1 Lack of confidence	Sessions 1, 6, 7
7.2 Academic work	Sessions 1, 5, 6, 8
7.3 Emotional control	Sessions 3, 5, 7, 8
Theme 8: Coping mechanisms (relate to strategies to adapt to contextual difficulties in order to bring comfort)	
Sessions	Sessions 5, 8
8.2 Learning by doing	Sessions 1, 2, 3, 4
8.3 Counselling	Sessions 1, 5, 6, 7
Category C: Dynamic perspective (motivators that induce meaning and purpose)	
Theme 9: Preoccupations	
Data relating to thoughts occupying the participant's mind	
9.1 Failure	Sessions 1, 5, 7, 8
9.2 Success	Sessions 5, 7
9.3 Disappointment of others	Sessions 5, 7, 8
Theme 10: Aspirations (relate to the participant's hopes of certain achievements)	
10.1 Financial freedom	Sessions 1, 3, 8
10.2 Technical expert	Sessions 1, 3, 5, 6, 8
10.3 Inspirational leader	Sessions 1, 3, 5, 8
Theme 11: Work setting (relates to the participant's desired work environment)	
11.1 Hands-on, technical problem-solving activities	Sessions 1, 3, 4, 5, 8
Theme 12: Script (relates to the participant's life themes)	
12.1 Personal development	Sessions 1, 3, 4, 5, 8
12.2 Help others to grow	Sessions 1, 5, 8
Theme 13: Self-advice (personal recommendations that guide the participant)	
13.1 Concerning people, work, life	Sessions 1, 5, 8

he wanted to satisfy in himself . He was committed to personal growth:

I want to equip myself the best I can
and he wanted to create opportunities for other people to grow in themselves:

I want to enable other to also grow in that environment.

Discussion

George actively participated in the process of career-life construction and became the author (Savickas, 2011) of the process himself. Gaining insight into his major life themes provided meaning in his life. In his own words:

It was interesting to see how certain patterns repeat themselves during my life and all the different areas where I can find these patterns.

George's *sense of self* had improved substantially and he visualised and anticipated a meaningful life and career from the place he was currently occupying in his life span. George's reflection after Session 5 (in which the *Career Interest Profile* (Maree, J.G., 2010) was administered) was quite telling/revealing:

It really added a lot to my thought processes and explained why some issues hit harder than others. I feel that this session was one of the more rewarding sessions we had into the issue of where am I and, especially, where am I going (future focus).

George had become willing to explore what studies he could undertake and when would be the best time for him to pursue them. However, he now realised that he should maybe wait and settle in before he started with further studies. He was interested in doing a masters' degree in either engineering management (MEM) or project management (MPM) and he needed three years working experience before he could apply for either of these courses.

The process of narrative career counselling brought about enhanced *career adaptability* (transformation) (Savickas, 2011). George made comments on how he planned to create more conversations with his engineering colleagues by trying to have them join in on a once a week luncheon together at a pub close-by. He commented on being well aware that he still had a lot to learn in his capacity as 'candidate process engineer'. He confirmed that he was aware that he needed to work really hard to learn as much as he could from the company and knew that he should use the opportunities he had to build his experience base to become even more employable.

Lastly, George expressed new *hope for the future* (readiness to move). He mentioned that he needed to explore options to apply at other companies soon. George planned to stay at the company for the next 12-18 months and then to move on. He also realised that engineers in the company where he was working with often left after three to five years due to the lack of designing projects the company had to offer. He realised the value of being patient and attentive in one's environment but, at the same time, exploring other options as well. Similar findings were confirmed by Di Fabio & Maree (2012): '...the value of a qualitative [narrative] approach to career counseling [lies] in facilitating [a] better understanding of the value of meaning-making, personal agency, personal growth and

(co-) construction of meaning and acceptance of personal responsibility in the career counselling process'.

Conclusion

The case study demonstrates how career construction can help clients (re-)write their career-life stories and how it is a potentially practicable (theoretical and conceptual) framework for understanding the distinctive experiences of clients in general and newly graduated, first time employees (in this case, a young, male engineer) in particular in career-related contexts. The strategy and methods demonstrated here can be used to develop clients' sense of self and help them constructively manage and direct their future career while dealing with the transition from being a student to an employee.

¹ A pseudonym was used in the case study.

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