

Using “informal” hypnotherapy in career counselling: blending Savickas and Erickson to “free the angel”^{1, 2}

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This article describes the concept “informal hypnotherapy” and the overlap between aspects of Ericksonian hypnotherapy and facets of the career construction interview. The participant was a purposefully selected white Afrikaans-speaking woman who had an Honours degree in Educational Psychology. A case study is discussed in which the three anecdotes technique was used to augment the career construction interviewing process during career construction counselling. The intervention incorporated postmodern career facilitation techniques to enhance the involvement of the participant in her career construction process and to facilitate co-constructive conversation. Following the intervention, the client revealed heightened self-awareness, was empowered to use her story to negotiate transitions and to serve as a holding environment whenever life imposed changes on her, and appeared ready to engage with the world more adaptively. The use of the career construction interview (in combination with the three anecdotes technique) together with the use of basic Ericksonian strategies presents psychologists with an innovative, exciting and non-intrusive way of administering informal hypnotherapy.

Keywords: autobiographical reasoning; career construction interview; career counselling; Ericksonian hypnotherapy; holding environment; three anecdotes technique

Although much has been written, internationally, about the use of early anecdotes in counselling (Savickas, 2009a; 2009d; 2011), less has been written about its use in career counselling, particularly in (South) Africa. Furthermore, very little has been written about the overlap or crosswalk between the use of early anecdotes and the use of hypnotherapy in counselling. This article attempts to remedy this hiatus.

In the next section, I will deal with the essentials of the Ericksonian approach to hypnotherapy. I will then explain the rationale for the career construction interview (Savickas, 2009b; 2010; 2012). Lastly, I will report on a case study that exemplifies the theoretical perspective proposed here.

All health profession and related practitioners use informal hypnotherapeutic strategies and techniques to influence people, often without being aware of actually doing so. Career counsellors, irrespective of whether they are trained hypnotherapists, implement strategies normally associated with Ericksonian hypnotherapy. The article will concentrate on the link between informal hypnotherapy and career construction counselling with a view to investigating the possible place of this mode of therapy in the theoretical as well as the practical psychotherapeutic theoretical framework. I will explain the theoretical crossover between these two concepts and use a case study to illustrate how the crossover occurs in practice. I will also provide guidelines on the use of informal hypnosis in career counselling to facilitate best practice.

Theoretical background: Ericksonian hypnotherapy

Erickson pioneered the art and science of indirect communication to promote the use of latent potential and enable healing (Battino & South, 2002) and, as it were, informal hypnotherapy. Whereas Hoyt (2003) argued that Erickson used Ericksonian hypnosis to help people deal with challenges by enabling them to use their strong points or assets, Thomason (2009, p. 353) maintained that “Erickson’s overall goal was to help clients get unstuck by getting them to have experiences that activated their own natural healing abilities”.

Geary (1996) stated that Ericksonian hypnosis always begins with a thorough assessment that identifies hypnotic phenomena, the client’s values, and major life themes. Such themes may include

any combination of the following and other challenges that have to be dealt with by the client and counsellor:³ low self-image or self-concept; unrealistic perception of the self or own intrinsic value; lack of assertiveness; sadness or depression; insecurity; feelings of rejection, inferiority and inadequacy; not being accepted by others; not fitting in; anxiety; not being understood; and uncertainty about the future.

Themes have to be clarified before intervention can commence. In Ericksonian terminology, interventions are “vehicles”, examples of which are direct suggestions, metaphors or anecdotes; re-framing; eliciting or telling stories; rewriting the script (a postmodern approach); and cognitive restructuring. These vehicles may be used either directly or indirectly. Direct strategies include trigger words; ego-strengthening strategies; simple direct suggestions (such as those used in aversion therapy, behavioural modification therapy, and positive support therapy); and cognitive, behavioural techniques (“The power of direct suggestion should not be underestimated”, SASCH, 2011, p. 68).

Indirect strategies, on the other hand, could be subconscious (in a planned narrative, a therapist may emphasize certain key words, which are the essential suggestions, for instance: “You will be surprised to learn how easy it can be to relax; how effortlessly you can allow yourself to picture yourself facing your angry friend”). Metaphors, too, are a way of administering therapy indirectly. Metaphors, which form the basis of classical Ericksonian therapy, may seem abstract and story-like, but, when they are well selected and timeously delivered, they may result in profound improvement.

Ericksonian therapists stress the importance of listening carefully for “symptom words” (Geary, 1996), which can assist the therapist to portray or describe the nature of the “real” problem or challenge. Likewise, it is essential to listen for repeated words, phrases or figures of speech, that may shed further light on the client’s particular problem. Geary (1994) and Zeig (1994) both emphasized the importance of “seeding”, that is, rendering the client “response ready” (Geary, 1996, p. 320) for subsequent interventions. In other words, an environment and climate is created that facilitates therapy.

Given the above and for the purposes of this article, Ericksonian hypnotherapy is defined as a state of focused attention that facilitates influential communication by counsellors aimed at enabling clients to find advice from within to meet personal challenges. This can be achieved when clients are empowered to take a fresh look at “problems” from a strength- and weakness-based perspective: strong points are rediscovered and used, and weak points are converted into strong points. By using strong and weak points, workable “solutions” to problems are often discovered (Olivier, 1991).

Career construction counselling for life designing

Over the past number of years, several researchers have stressed the importance of designing a life that is experienced as successful and satisfactory by people (Savickas et al., 2009). These researchers also maintain that lives should be designed in such a way that people can redesign their lives when their circumstances and needs change and they face repeated transitions. However, in a world characterized by ongoing change, uncertainty and flexibility, this ideal has become far harder to realize (Guichard, 2009). In the 21st century, people are expected to hold themselves and their lives together in the face of escalating discontinuity (Savickas, 2007). They are expected to be more self-sufficient by repeatedly drawing on their own advice, which can be drawn from their own life stories. Important as interpersonal communication is, no one can be the ultimate expert on anyone else — the only person who really knows his or her own story is that person himself or herself.

Counsellors are consequently reminded of the un wisdom of adopting an all-knowing stance when interrelating with clients. Clients, ultimately, have to find advice or guidance from within, build on their own strengths and turn their weak points into strong points. They should therefore be encouraged to write and perform their own life stories as this will equip them with the necessary insight to face an uncertain future. Not only narrating but also writing one’s biography and drawing on this biography in times of trouble seems to be the only way to find meaning in a world that is becoming increasingly devoid of personal meaning. Eliciting and building on life stories is thus central in life

design counselling (Savickas et al., 2009).

The career construction interview using the three anecdotes technique (TAT) is used to apply the above theoretical principles in practice. This technique is regarded by many career counselling practitioners as an appropriate assessment and therapeutic mechanism that counsellors and clients can use to uncover essential facets of clients' personality and life structure. A brief discussion of the career construction interview follows.

Career construction interview using the three anecdotes technique

Clients' goals for counselling are elicited in the opening question of the career construction interview. Several primary questions are then asked to elicit narratives from clients to help counsellors grasp and co-construct their life stories (See: Case Study Results; Savickas, 2007; 2011). In recognising clients' present career concerns in relation to their stages of career development, the interview covers, in succession, each of the four fundamental components of career construction, namely, life structure, career adaptability, life themes, and personality style.

Use of early anecdotes: brief theoretical background

Savickas (2006) suggests that counsellors ask the following question to elicit clients' earliest anecdotes: "I am interested in hearing three stories about things you recall happening to you when you were three to eight years old." All responses are written down carefully. Early anecdotes are probed mainly to elicit clients' central preoccupations and problem themes that emerge in their responses to the career construction interview questions. The anecdotes often reflect the sequence of events that constitute clients' life stories (Savickas, 2008). Cochran (1997, p. 5) maintained that "[at] best, one or more early recollections will offer a prototype for a plot of life and career. Perhaps more commonly, early recollections offer fragments of a larger story that must still be composed". Misleadingly simple on the surface, these unembellished stories (anecdotes) are, in fact, deeply profound and can help counsellors identify clients' preoccupations and thereby assist clients in "actively master[ing] what they have passively suffered" (Prof Mark Savickas, personal communication, 2010).

Considering the three anecdotes technique from a person-centred perspective, Adler (1932) maintained that there is no such thing as "chance" memories and that early anecdotes reflect the stories of clients' lives. Clients often repeat stories to themselves to warn or comfort themselves, to keep themselves focused on their goals, and to prepare themselves — through revisiting (drawing advice from) past experiences — for the future with a proven plan of action.

Using early anecdotes to identify major life themes

When counsellors listen to clients' stories, they have to identify the major life themes in these stories. Every story has linear incidents (plots) and underlying themes (timelines). Counsellors also have to identify clients' pain and preoccupations, and, by carefully analysing their anecdotes (stories), they can help clients identify the themes in their stories.

Key facets of the counsellor's aim during life design counselling

Facilitating narratibility

Savickas (2009a; 2009b) asserted that people draw on autobiographical reasoning when they make a change in their lives. In other words, they use their own stories to "hold" themselves. This process is referred to as narratibility, and it is about people's ability to say who they really are. The extent to which people can narrate the meaning of their lives indicates how much of what they do will matter to others. A counsellor's main aim is therefore to help clients narrate and listen to their own stories.

Encouraging biographicity

Counsellors have to be "useful" to clients as they identify their life themes so that they can use work

to become more whole. Savickas (2009a; 2009b) coined the term “biographicity” to signify clients’ ability to use their own stories to negotiate transitions. “Biographicity” also denotes clients’ capacity to use their stories as holding environments when life imposes changes on them.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this article is to show the overlap between aspects of Ericksonian hypnotherapy and facets of the career construction interview. The study sought to find answers to the following questions.

- a. What are the similarities between using the career construction interview and administering Ericksonian hypnotherapy?
- b. In what ways can the career construction interview (using key principles in Ericksonian hypnotherapy) contribute to changes in the life of, for example, a young woman who seeks career counselling?
- c. How can the counsellor facilitate the client’s reflection on and analysis of her life stories in such a way that life designing is promoted?

METHOD

Participant and context

The participant was a purposefully selected 35-year-old white Afrikaans-speaking woman (Olivia — a pseudonym). As a registered psychometrist, Olivia had an Honours degree in Educational Psychology. She volunteered to act as the “client” during a live demonstration (which formed part of a course in Ericksonian hypnotherapy in 2011) of how the technique (administering the career construction interview using the TAT) is applied in practice. At the end of this type of demonstration, three attendees are usually asked to tell the audience what the client’s story means to them personally. The attendees are reminded of the ethical issues involved: no one is allowed, for instance, to abuse a client’s privacy, for example, by discussing the case with anyone else. The selection criteria called for a person who evinced a need for career counselling and was willing to volunteer as the “client” in a live demonstration during a two-day workshop on Career Construction Counselling for Life Designing (an element of convenience sampling thus also characterized the sampling style).

Mode of inquiry

The study was based on an interpretivist paradigm, involving understanding and interpreting meanings as revealed during interactions. The research design was qualitative.

The three anecdotes technique was used to augment the career construction interviewing process during career construction counselling. The intervention incorporated postmodern career facilitation techniques (Maree, 2010) to enhance the involvement of the participant in her career construction process and to facilitate co-constructive conversation. Qualitative data sources⁴ were (i) *observation*, which was documented in field notes and a research diary, (ii) *formal* and *informal conversational* data during the interaction between the participant and the counsellor, which were recorded and transcribed, and (iii) the participant’s *journal* in which she reflected upon her experience of the sessions. The initial session was followed by four further personal meetings between the counsellor and the participant to clarify any possible misunderstandings. In between these sessions, the counsellor presented and discussed copies of the transcriptions of their conversations to the participant for purposes of validation. This process was repeated until the participant confirmed the correctness of the data.

Data-gathering strategy

Creating a sacred space

Savickas (2006) stressed the importance of making clients feel safe first — creating a “*sacred (safe) space*” between counsellors and clients before clients are invited to share their early recollections

(their “secrets”) with them. The counsellor achieves this aim by administering the career construction interview, and, once it has been concluded, the three early anecdotes are elicited.

Eliciting the three early anecdotes

Savickas (2006, p. 1) proposed the following questions to elicit **three early anecdotes**: “What is the first thing you remember about your life? What are your earliest recollections? I am interested in hearing three stories about things you recall happening to you when you were three to eight years old.”

Data analysis

Whatever the participant says should be carefully noted and written down. The first *verb* used is of special importance because it indicates action and how the participant engages with the world. The counsellor invariably revisits this verb at the end of the session. Repeated words, phrases or expressions should also be noted because they offer important clues about clients’ *life themes*. After the clients have told their stories, the counsellor announces: “Now let’s pretend that each of these stories will appear in tomorrow’s newspapers. Each story will have a headline. Each headline will have a verb. I want you to write this headline.”

During feedback, which typically starts with a discussion of the client’s early recollections (“secrets”), the counsellor points out that although these memories (the anecdotes or secrets) may seem superficial, they are full of meaning and represent the client’s advice to himself or herself (*pre-hypnotic suggestion*). The counsellor stresses that these anecdotes or stories reveal life-long *themes*: “It seems your first story has a theme of deep disappointment”. Or, perhaps: “A *theme* that I have heard in your other stories as well suggests you are an independent, creative person”. Another way of facilitating the discussion may be to say: “Your first headline *suggests* a particularly important theme: Your commitment to the cause of the underdog.” Or something like the following: “Likewise, your second story summarizes your mission in life, which seems to be the desire to help others. No matter what you do, you will always want to help others. You see, in your career you need to do what you have been rehearsing all your life. That is who you are, that is what you have to do (*post-hypnotic suggestion*).”

Making sure that clients hear what they tell themselves: repeating clients’ own words

Clients’ own words and expressions are repeated frequently (*indirect suggestion*) by the counsellor, and clients should be prompted to say these words and expressions out loud because the more they say them out loud, the more the words and expressions will become authentic to them. When clients express fear or anxiety, for example, they are reminded that this proves only how brave or bold they are for admitting the anxiety and that one can only become stronger at something one is weak at.

Observing participants: “The body never lies”

Savickas (2009a; 2009b) stresses the importance of observing participants closely the whole time, noting bodily changes, remarks, sighs, shifts in the position of the body, direction of the gaze, and so on (*showing subconscious respect*). In his words: “The body never lies” (Savickas, 2009b). Bodily movements and other non-verbal cues are extremely helpful in “reading” participants and being useful to them as they *tell*, *interpret* and *rewrite* their *stories* (*reframing*). These observations have to be incorporated into the counselling and other information.

Starting the feedback session

The career construction interview is typically concluded by asking the client to return to the counsellor’s first question: “How can I be useful to you?” The counsellor reads the client’s response back verbatim, contextualizes it and asks the client if his or her initial request has been addressed satis-

factorily. Counsellors should ensure that clients not only listen to themselves but actually hear what they are saying to themselves. In other words, counsellors should repeat to clients what they have said and refrain from any interpretation themselves so that the clients can, firstly, hear and internalize and, secondly, live what they themselves have said. In other words, counsellors should let the words echo in clients' minds (Savickas, 2009a; 2009b).

Using metaphors to wrap up the career construction interview

Metaphors can be created quite easily when the underlying theme of the presenting problem has been identified (Yapko, 1995). Because symptoms can be viewed as metaphorical communication, they are therapeutic in their ability to match clients' indirect communication style. Metaphors help in accessing hidden resources and in searching for relevance and projection (Yapko, 1995). Counsellors may consequently wrap up the career construction interview by using metaphors that the clients themselves used during the interview. Examples of such metaphors are: "You are an awe-inspiring painting that is about to be revealed", "a beautiful song", "a haunting novel", and "a timeless Bible verse".

Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness was ensured through the implementation of various strategies during the data collection and analysis phases. This included credibility (multi-method strategies facilitated triangulation and crystallisation; peer debriefing and participant review were carried out); dependability was ensured by verbatim reporting of the data and low inference explanations; confirmability was ensured by avoiding selective use of the data. By supporting inferences with sufficient evidence, transferability could take place.

Ethical issues

Measures to promote the research participant's wellbeing were implemented throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained and confidentiality was maintained. Written permission was given for the publication of the case study on condition that the participant's anonymity would be protected. The counsellor provided written feedback to the participant during all the phases of the study, and the research findings were released in a responsible manner. At the end of this type of live demonstration, three attendees are generally asked to tell the audience what the participant's story meant to them personally. Attendees are reminded of the ethical issues involved: No one is allowed, for instance, to abuse a participant's privacy, for example, by discussing the case with anyone else.

Limitations

Because only one case study was investigated, generalisation of the study findings is limited. Although steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, the subjective interpretation of the counsellor could also be seen as a limitation.

CASE STUDY RESULTS

Olivia, a 29-year old woman, is unhappy in her current work environment. She is a part-time lecturer who initially entered tertiary training to earn extra income and to gain experience. However, her expectations have not been realized, and she feels that she is stagnating in her work. This has given rise to feelings of powerlessness and inferiority:⁵ "because many of my previous students are now getting appointed in positions that are senior to mine. This makes me feel incompetent".

Olivia's responses to the questions in the career construction interview (Savickas, 2009a; 2009b) are given below.

How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?

I seek a different perspective as regards my choice of a career because the thirties are ap-

proaching and I come from a generation where one still needs to have a career and not a job. I find myself in a conflicting situation. Whereas I am comfortable with the type of work I am doing, this does not apply to where I am working. What I find particularly annoying is the whole idea of “contract work”. Every time for instance a meeting is scheduled, I am reminded: “You are only a contract worker.”

1. Role models

Whom do you admire or did you admire when you were growing up?

Hitler. (smiles) Hmmmm ... I know what you are thinking but his big dream was to become the world’s best painter. He inspired people and made them feel capable of rising above their circumstances. My second role model is a line manager. He is very busy but finds time ... always finds time (smiles) — there is a difference — for others. My third role model is my doctor (looks into the distance.) He is willing to allow free follow-up visits until he (the doctor) believes one is well again. (The patient often believes she or he is well, which might not be the case).

2. Magazines/ TV shows

What magazines do you read regularly? What television shows do you really enjoy?

(Sighs heavily.) I read all those House and Home Magazines. I buy the Woolworths triple pack (three magazines in a package), which usually contains a House and Home. The choice as to what to read is made on my behalf; I can just sit and relax.

NCIS. When I was little, there was a programme on air which gave one all the clues to a crime. One had to find out who the guilty person was. When I watch NCIS, it is almost as if I am doing the same. I enjoy finding out who the guilty party is before the characters in the play do.

3. Movies/Books

What is your favourite book or movie? Recount the story.

(Sighs.) This is the story of a woman who has been alive forever. Every day she has to climb a number of marble steps. Since she has been climbing these steps for ages, they have become worn out over time. This, more than anything, shows her persistence and self-discipline. She is just always there. People come and go in her life but she always remains the same. (Everybody refers to her as “She”).

Dexter. Dexter is a serial killer, but he commits murders on purpose. After a few shows, one ends up on his side, afraid that he might be caught. In every new episode I try to find something good in him; something which acts as an excuse for his behaviour.

4. Mottos

What is your favourite saying or motto? Recount a saying you remember hearing or create your own.

“Life is for living.”

“Life is not measured by the number of breaths you take but by the moments that take your breath away.”

“Keep on believing.”

Olivia’s three earliest anecdotes

Olivia shared the following three stories with her counsellor.

1. Toys flee careless young girl

I was three years old when this happened. I woke up one morning hearing my mother talking to my father about my toys, muted, but loud enough for me to hear. I went to the kitchen and she informed me that my toys had run away. I went through the garden retrieving toys stuck in the

fence and halfway up trees. Apparently they wanted to run away because I did not pick them up after playing with them.

2. Forlorn young girl left stranded

I remember a day (I was four years old at the time) when my father and I were driving from hospital to hospital and from to clinic to clinic in neighbouring towns to find my mother (who had been taken away by helicopter). (We were living in a small town with only one clinic at the time.) We stopped at each facility to enquire if the helicopter with my mother in it had landed there. It took us a long time and when we finally reached the right hospital (in other words, the hospital to which my mother had been taken to give birth to her child), we were informed that my brother had been born. However, I was not allowed to see him. This was the first time ever I had been left alone. My father had to leave me behind when he entered the hospital.

3. Teacher's fiancée helps young woman expose teacher's mask

I was seven years old at the time. I hated school but one day I went there and was surprised to meet a "new" teacher there. Whereas my teacher always yelled and shrieked, she was different on that day ... because her fiancée was there. My teacher's fiancée had flown to Cape Town to visit her, so he came to school on that day. He read us stories, all the time doing the different, funny voices. We played outside a lot and did many fun things we had never before done at school. (Shakes her head, looks at the counsellor pensively and continues in a measured tone.) That was the day I learned about masks, falseness and how people mislead others.

Feedback commenced with a discussion and analysis of the three early anecdotes.

Analysis of the three early anecdotes

Olivia's response to the initial question (and the disappointment she expressed about her working environment) reveals her current problem as well as her plan for solving the problem. She is seeking a different perspective on her choice of a career. She knows that she is growing older (approaching her thirties) and realizes that she has little option now but to find permanent employment in an atmosphere where she will feel valued, safe and free of the conflict she is currently experiencing (a holding environment). At present, she only has a "job" and not a career (which is what she desperately wants).

Olivia's **first memory** (of parents who had indirectly reprimanded her about her toys, which she had trusted unconditionally and which had "run away") is understandable: because she was "indirectly reprimanded" (**a central life problem**) early in her life, she is anxious to obtain honest, direct guidelines from people she can trust (as she trusted her parents at the time). At present, she feels that the people she should have been able to trust about her career path have misled her:

I also realize that I was rejected (**another central life theme**) by my 'trustworthy' toys. They left me, I never left them. This is still the case today. Each time I do not do what is deemed perfectly right, people that I should have been able to trust turn their back on me.

Olivia's first verb is "woke up". She is almost in a haze, that is, she is in a sleep-like state, paralysed as it were, "functioning but not living" (smiles sadly.) This is why she is consulting the counsellor. Feeling rejected and betrayed, she is uncertain about the future, and her trust in people is virtually non-existent. She just does not know how to engage with the career world and move forward. Yet, her advice to herself is to wake up and to change the direction of her life. While **Olivia narrated** these stories, the counsellor repeated the key phrases and clarified the meaning of the words and expressions she used to ensure that she listened to herself carefully and actually heard herself saying what she was trying to say. In other words, he facilitated **narratibility**.

When asked to reflect on the second story, Olivia commented as follows:

Even though I am part of the process where I work, I realize that I am not part of the final product. There seems to be no **personal contact** between myself and the students or myself and my colleagues. The future looks rather blurred. I feel left out and rejected because even my previous students have surpassed me. (She looks broodingly into the distance.) I am just a small, insignificant cog in a very big machine. No warmth, no respect for my contribution, no value is given to getting to know the real person. Similarly to what happened in my story, it is as if I have reached the place where I was supposed to go but now I am not allowed to enter. The feeling of being “just not good enough” seems to be an integral part of who I am. Once again, I am left alone, not allowed to enter.

Her **second story** thus confirms the disappointment she felt when she looked everywhere for her mother (a holding environment) only to discover when she eventually found her that she was not allowed to see her. Her growing concern that her current working environment has failed to provide her with a holding environment, a secure future, career and life identity is confirmed.

When asked to reflect on her **third story**, Olivia commented as follows:

I still enjoy meeting new people, going into a room with strangers and taking the time to really get to know them. Trying to see who they really are, wanting to meet not only the masks in front of me, but the real people behind them. Comparing how they treat each other and the comparison of how they treat me. I often ponder my own mask. Who am I really? What do I need to portray to fit in? What will happen if the mask slips? For me the measure of true friendship is finding the people where I can take my mask off and sharing the real me with them. Through this narrative enquiry I am currently working towards finding a safe haven where the mask will not be necessary.

Olivia also believes that the time has come to be honest with herself. To wake up, so to speak, if she is to stand any chance of realising her dream of “finding permanent employment in an atmosphere where I will feel valued, safe and without the conflict I am currently facing”. A sincere, caring human being, Olivia is desperately in search of a holding environment where she, in turn, can hold others.

Analysis of the career construction interview

Virtually every answer to the questions asked in the course of the life-story interview supports the hypotheses discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

Role models

Her role models (Hitler, her line manager, and her doctor) confirm her **central life goal** and her envisaged solution to her central life problem: she wants to excel in her work; she wants a more creative working environment; she will not accept defeat but will strive to overcome challenges and inspire others (Hitler). She is also searching for a working environment where she will have sufficient time for other people (a **central life theme**) and where she can rise above petty squabbles and deal with challenges as they arise (line manager). For her, change implies being left alone again (another **central life theme**). She wants to act in a passionate and genuine manner and continue her attempts to find a working environment where she can help others (**a major central life goal**). “This is almost about finding an escape route.”

Accounts of a book and a film

She is the main character in her favourite book who is known for her sense of responsibility towards others. Not unlike the main character (*She*), Olivia has developed the capacity to remain the same even when things around her change (“I will always be who I am and not leave others in the lurch”). Like *She*, Olivia hates the idea of having to wear a mask (i.e., not be who she is). She has made up her mind to remain true to who she is, irrespective of what others may think or feel. She will not be deterred.

In contrast to the character in her favourite book, the main character in her favourite TV programme, *Dexter*, wears a mask continuously. “Dexter remains a serial killer during the day. He just has to wear a mask in order to survive.” This comment again reveals her need to be who she actually is and to expose and deal with injustice, deceit and dishonesty.

Mottos

Her mottos shed light on her own best advice to herself. In what ways should she deal with her central life problem and become more complete/whole? — by starting to find a way to really live. Furthermore, she intends to break the monotonous daily routine that characterizes her life at present by finding something “breath-taking” that she can engage in and that will inspire her. She believes that all hope is not lost; she has to believe (in herself and in her future). She decides to draw on her past experience: what she has endured in life has taught her to remain motivated and dedicated to her goal. Because she has not been treated with the respect and love she deserves, her desire is to “do unto others as I would want them to do unto me”. Lastly, remembering that she has “survived” pain and suffering in her life, she believes that she can survive her current crisis as well.

Favourite magazines and television shows

Her responses to this question reflect the occupational environment in which she wishes to act out her self-concept. She wants to be left alone to make choices on her own and to find sufficient time to enjoy life and relax. She is tired of her highly predictable life and yearns for opportunities to act creatively and enjoy the feeling of not being bound to strict routine. *NCIS* confirms the impression that she has an inquiring mind, enjoys solving puzzles, strives to understand human behaviour and wants to be useful to others.

Sequel

The counsellor concluded the session by telling Olivia that she reminded him of a character in the book *Dog as a metaphor for the soul* by Mike Finley: “Your story is truly inspirational. I stand in the presence of a deeply loyal, caring woman. It is almost as if I am about to unveil a new DVD, entitled something like *The woman who really cared*, by Olivia. See, you have the amazing capacity to care for others like you care for your dogs ... lovingly, sincerely, loyally. In other words, you have an exceptional capacity to bring out the very best in others.”

He subsequently requested Olivia to return home and consider possible options for dealing with the challenges confronting her. Her responses appear below:

Firstly, regrettably, the first option is to stay put. (Shakes her head and looks despondently into the distance.) It is a matter of “better the devil you know ...”.

(Sits still and stares in front of her.) I am sure I will do one of the other four.” (Silence, stares in front of her.) My second option is to start teaching. (Silence.) This will mean working at either a Further Education and Training (FET) college or a secondary school. Since I am not properly trained to teach at a primary school, taking up a post there will mean stepping into another uncertain situation. (Smiles wryly.) Not my first option, yet, I will enjoy all the typical job perks: holidays, stability, medical aid fund, etc.” My third option is to offer additional mathematics classes from my home. My house has an extra room which I have converted into a facility for this kind of activity. (Laughs.) I am currently using it only once per week. (Smiles, dreamy-eyed.) This is a particularly enticing option. I am at home and I can determine my own hours. Every child’s problem is unique; I will cherish the challenge to help him or her find a creative solution to his or her own situation. Fourthly, my cousin invited me to open a so-called “home cell” for a home schooling franchise. One gets paid to take care of about 15 kids at a time. (Sighs.) My fifth and last option is to stay at home and be a housewife until I am bored to death, which will happen. (Laughs.)

In response to the counsellor's question: "Have I been useful to you during these sessions?", Olivia replied:

Other than usual, standard therapy, where one walks in, purges and walks out, I kept on thinking about the things that we discussed even after the sessions. For instance, every time a new theme emerged, it kept on turning in my head. This past weekend, visiting my Mom, I was challenging, which normally I am not! (Bites her lower lip. Silence.) Some aspects cut deep ... if I were requested to recall a story, 80 more would come up afterwards; buried deeply in my subconscious.

At the conclusion of this session, Olivia commented: "At present, I am just so tired that I am afraid of making the wrong decision. I need more time to investigate properly." (In hypnotherapeutic terms, Olivia is in a classical stuck state. She was accordingly asked to do a thorough job analysis of the second and third options and then report back to the counsellor for a follow-up discussion.)

A few weeks later, Olivia told the counsellor that she had done her "homework" thoroughly and was ready to make a decision. She had decided to change careers by resigning from her current job to take up a post at either an FET college or a primary school (she was awaiting the outcome of the applications she had submitted since her last meeting with the counsellor). In her own words: "I will stay on in my current work until the outcome of my applications has been announced. However, I will resign as soon as I have finalized arrangements regarding my new post." She had also decided to enrol for a Masters' degree in Education as soon as possible and spend as much time as she could with her family.

It is hoped that, collectively, these three moves will provide a holding environment for Olivia in the future and help her deal with the various transitions in her life. She is determined to make the transition to a working environment that will enable her to assist others overcome challenges similar to her own and to make a social contribution. By drawing on her own story, she will be empowered to deal with other difficult transitions that lie ahead and, in the process, turn adversity into privilege, disappointment into satisfaction and frustration into success.

(It should be mentioned at this stage that the researcher-counsellor had referred Olivia to a clinical psychologist to help her deal with the unresolved personal issues (highlighted above) that emerged during the career construction interview.)

DISCUSSION

The findings of my study are consistent with the results of previous studies (Savickas, 2008; Taber, Hartung, Briddick, Briddick, & Rehfuss, 2011). The data suggest that the use of early anecdotes is a promising strategy for involving clients in clarifying their self-concepts, explicating a more inclusive picture of their life situation, the path it could follow and the design of their lives. The technique discussed here can enable the individuals concerned to understand themselves better, experience growth, discover themselves and find advice from within to help them solve fundamental personal problems. The technique can also assist clients to identify central life themes that can help them deal with problems and manage repeated transitions. Clients can be empowered to construct their own lives and (re-)write their life stories in collaboration with counsellors. In the process, they can regain self-respect and hope. In the present study, the participant appears ready to engage with the world more adaptively. Her heightened self-awareness is evident in the following extract "It was good to be reminded, albeit by myself, of how I could go about to handle the difficult situation in which I find myself at present."

Olivia remarked that the sessions enabled her to make changes that "I should have made long ago." According to Savickas et al. (2009, p. 245), the change in Olivia is facilitated by adaptability while her narratability will ensure continuity in her future efforts. As suggested by Savickas (2009a; 2009b), Olivia drew on autobiographical reasoning at this point in life (when she needed to make a change), and she can now use her story to hold herself. She has been empowered to say who she really

is, to use her story to negotiate transitions and to serve as a holding environment whenever life imposes changes on her in the future. In other words, biographicity, too, has been facilitated. The counsellor merely helped her narrate and listen to her own story.

CONCLUSION

Further research in this field is needed as the findings may have consequences for the practice of (career) counselling. Firstly, counsellors will benefit from training in the use of the career construction interview including the three anecdotes technique. Secondly, prospective Ericksonian and ego state hypnotherapists in particular may benefit from the inclusion of the career construction interview using the three anecdotes technique in their training programmes and curricula. Thirdly, career counsellors may likewise benefit from the inclusion of training in basic Ericksonian hypnotherapy in their curricula. Fourthly: this study emphasizes the need for an approach that will promote a deeper understanding of the importance of meaning making, personal agency, personal growth, self- and co-construction and acceptance of personal responsibility in the counselling process. The contemporary narrative approach, together with consideration of the results obtained by quantitative instruments, may well help professionals resolve the typical problems in contemporary practice (Porfeli, 2003). Olivia's concluding comments during the fifth session are illuminating:

This ... this was almost cleansing. I cannot think of another word. (Smiles.) It is as if I gained self-confidence to enable me to reach out to people (friends, family) around me. Maybe they feel the way I do?

Olivia concluded:

The discussions made me reconsider issues that I had been avoiding for far too long. It has set me thinking, and I think I understand myself better now. I am more assertive now and I realize that I, too, have a right and responsibility to design a happy life. I have decided to wake up, take stock and take care of my own needs and also help others in the process.

NOTES

- 1 "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free" (Michelangelo Buonarroti, Italian architect, painter and sculptor, 1475-1564).
- 2 The article is based on the following paper: Maree, J.G. (2011). *The informal use of hypnosis in therapy*. Keynote address, 4th Annual National Conference of the South African Society for Clinical Hypnosis. Unitas Hospital, Centurion, 5 June 2011.
- 3 In this article, the words "counsellor", "therapist" and "career counsellor" are used interchangeably.
- 4 Due to space constraints, I have not reported on all the data or integrated all the data into the results.
- 5 The verbatim responses of the participant have been only lightly edited to preserve the authenticity of what she said.

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