

## **An Interview with Kobus Maree: Life Themes to Life Portraits**

**Kobus Maree**  
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( interviewed on behalf of North American Journal of Psychology by )

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Dr. Kobus Maree has authored more than 120 peer reviewed articles and 60 books or book chapters. In 2009 he was awarded the Stals Prize of the South African Academy of Sciences and Arts. In 2010 he received the Chancellor's Medal for Teaching and Learning from his university.

**NAJP:** Professor Maree, first of all, what led you into career/occupational and vocational counseling?

**KM:** Mike, this goes back a long way. In my latest single-authored book, *Counselling for career construction: Connecting life themes to construct life portraits. Turning pain into hope*, I elaborate on this very question. The following statement lies at the heart of everything I do and stand for: I was always saddened by and took a particular interest in people at the fringes of society.

I grew up as a member of a poor family in an extremely impoverished, rural environment. On a daily basis I would experience first-hand the suffering of others and the loss of so much talent. This saddened me immensely. Always an 'outsider' myself – growing up as the child of an English-speaking (Catholic) mother of Lebanese origin and an Afrikaans (Protestant) father in an exclusively Afrikaans milieu at the height of apartheid, always asking 'weird' questions ("What happens when we die?"; "Who takes care of hungry, rejected people and unwanted animals?").

A particular early recollection stands out: one Christmas day, when I was seven years old, my family and I visited neighbours on a farm in the distant Northern Cape. After lunch on that extremely hot afternoon, walking in the *veld*, I passed by a shack. I heard a faint noise coming from inside it. Upon inspection, it turned out that two very young children were hiding inside the scorching zinc structure. The older of the

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two forsaken youngsters said: "Mommy is in jail and Daddy died long ago. The woman we live with is drunk today." I was deeply upset and saddened by this human tragedy. My entire life was shaped by this incident, the memory of which crystallized into a profound and unrelenting desire to find ways to 'help' people in need. The older I got, the more I was intrigued by the way in which human beings deal with their own pain, sorrow, sadness and loss by doing something for others. I have often witnessed and been inspired by people who have suffered a tragic loss, only to reach out to others who have suffered a similar loss ... And in doing so deal with their own loss by this selfless act. Even though Freud is generally acknowledged as the first person to refer to the principle of turning passive acceptance of a given situation into active mastery of that situation, Mark Savickas (2011b) coined the expression "actively master what you have passively suffered." Mark empowered us to not only identify clients' initial pain but also to empower them to use their pain to help others and, in the process, heal themselves and make social contributions.

**NAJP:** Your book has been positively reviewed by scholars from all over the world--what does that say to you about the need for career construction?

**KM:** Many career counseling-related questions arise from the demise of jobs. Since many individuals will be unable to maintain their employment, they must acquire new skills to become employable instead (Savickas, 2011a). There is general agreement about the impact of global change (Maree, 2012a) on career counselors' ability to help people choose careers ('construct themselves') and embrace, celebrate and manage multiple changes satisfactorily, thereby promoting greater work and life satisfaction. A more up-to-date approach is needed to respond adequately to new developments in the field, such as developing decision-making capacity, indecision, lack of realism, finding personal meaning in one's work, designing a successful life and making social contributions (Crites, 1969; Savickas, 2010).

**NAJP:** Why the term "career construction?"

**KM:** Career construction theory was the brain child of Savickas (2011b). Defining career from an active, movement perspective, career construction theory theorizes that people construct their own lives and careers by imposing meaning on their work-related actions. Career counselors therefore urge clients to reflect on, re-interpret, and contextualize earlier memories, present experiences and future

aspirations. In narrating their own life stories, clients narrate and connect the multiple smaller and longer stories that collectively constitute the grand (encompassing) story or narrative of their lives. They also reconnect or rekindle the feeling of being in touch with their innermost selves. Narrating their life stories has in fact become a crucial activity for workers, who are being confronted ever more with the impact of change on the workplace and thus are called upon to face and deal with repeated work-related crossroads and transitions (Savickas, 2011b). The *Career Construction Interview (CCI)*, which comprises five story-constructing questions (Hartung, 2010; Savickas, 2009a, b; 2011b), lies at the heart of this approach. This interview can be used alone or in conjunction with other techniques to elicit clients' career and life stories.

**NAJP:** Why do we need a new approach to career counseling in the year 2013?

**KM:** Major changes in the world of work and careers necessitate a more up-to-date approach to enable career counselors and their clients to respond adequately to new developments in the world of work. Clients should be equipped with the skills to negotiate career transitions. The 20<sup>th</sup> century approaches still have continued value and power for 21<sup>st</sup> century career counseling practice, but no longer adequately serve the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century people. The aim of present-day career counseling theory should be to enable clients to focus on the 'bigger picture' in their career and life stories; to help them construct careers, design successful lives and make social contributions. The importance of reflecting and reflexivity as integral aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century career counseling is emphasized. I therefore propose meta-reflection based on career construction principles and practices to provide a personal and thoughtful examination of repeated reflection in career counseling. Taking my cue from Winslade (2011), I believe that career counseling today should enable career counselors to answer the following questions: how will postmodern career counseling be useful to all people, irrespective of color, creed, financial situation or geographic location (Maree, 2013).

**NAJP:** Talk to us about "early recollections"---something most American psychologists associate with Alfred Adler.

**KM:** General agreement exists that earliest recollections often signal the sequence of events that compose clients' life stories (Adler, 1929, Savickas, 2008). Counselors should carefully 'nudge' clients towards analyzing their earliest recollections to discover 'timeless' themes in their stories: their pain and their preoccupations. According to Adler (1958, p.

73), "[a client's earliest] memories represent his [or her] life story; a story he [or she] repeats to himself [or herself] to warn him [or her] or to comfort [or inspire] him [or her], to keep him [or her] concentrated on his [or her] goal, to prepare him [or her], by means of past experiences, to meet the future with an already tested style of action". These 'simple' stories (earliest recollections) are deeply profound and can help (career) counselors identify clients' preoccupations. From an individual psychology, person-centered perspective, Adler (1933) maintains there is no such thing as 'chance' memories: People often reflexively repeat stories to themselves to construct, deconstruct, reconstruct, and co-construct themselves. The aim is to advise, soothe, caution or comfort themselves; to draw on advice from past experiences to keep themselves focused on their goals and to prepare themselves for the future with proven plans of action. This technique or strategy (Maree, 2013) is used to gather information on and transform the theoretical approaches into a constructivist career counseling strategy and methods that normalize clients' experiences and encourage them to (re-)author their career and life stories. The aim is to enhance their chances of experiencing work as a personally meaningful endeavour and context for development.

**NAJP:** Mark Savickas - who is he, and why does he hold an important place in your life and in this book?

**KM:** Mark Savickas played a vital role in articulating a new framework for career counseling for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His contribution to vocational guidance and career counseling has both theoretical and practical value for all professionals involved in helping people not only choose jobs, but, more importantly, "construct careers by imposing meaning on their vocational behaviour and occupational experiences" (Savickas, 2005, p. 43). He is widely regarded as a leading researcher, scholar and thinker in the field of Career Counseling. His contributions to these fields are rightly described as "pioneering" and "ground-breaking." His book, *Career counseling* (Savickas, 2011a), covers the latest developments and trends in the field, maps the way forward, and constitutes a benchmark for everyone writing on the subject. He has received universal recognition for changing the face of Career Counseling globally. Savickas' contributions are made more extraordinary because of his success in demonstrating the value of qualitative counseling in career counseling and for exacting rigor in qualitative career counseling interventions (Di Fabio, 2012). The fact that very few scholars these days question the merits of either a qualitative or a combined qualitative+quantitative approach to career counseling can largely be ascribed to his efforts.

**NAJP:** In some countries--upward mobility is simply not that easy. Should individuals in these countries be content with their lot, or seek alternative routes ? Or an alternative life portrait?

**KM:** No – all of us, no matter where in the world, should be allowed to narrate our stories to empathetic career counselors, who can help us to complete our life portraits and move forward after having identified our major life themes by connecting the multiple smaller stories into one, continuous, grand story which reveals our identities; who we really are. In essence: We all deserve to be enabled to find out what our destiny is. What we really want to achieve in life. Realizing that billions of people have never been given and will never be given the opportunity to construct themselves ('realize their potential' – Maslow, 1987), to design even remotely successful lives and to make social contributions, I cannot but agree with the following sentiment expressed by Bar-On (2007): "It will suffice to say that [conditions in which people are deprived of an opportunity to blossom] hide, if not bury, many gifted individuals, compounding the human tragedy that they evoke. It is interesting to ponder, for example, how many gifted individuals were buried, both figuratively and literally, among the six million Jews killed during the Second World War. Have we lost *another* Abraham, Jesus, Nostradamus, Spinoza, Mahler, Kafka, Pissarro, Marx, Freud or Einstein who may have significantly contributed to human existence and mankind?" (Bar-On, 2007, p. 137).

Clearly, a career counseling strategy is needed for all people across the diversity continuum. All clients deserve career counseling irrespective of gender, socioeconomic situation, sexual preference, age or creed, including the most disadvantaged. The focus on career counseling internationally accordingly needs to be adapted to meet the requirements of all people.

**NAJP:** You have a theme of "Turning Pain into Hope." Does this exemplify your ideas or the process of counseling?

**KM:** Yes. Let me start by drawing on the collective perspective of Herman (1992, p. 207), Marsh (1933), Rosenberg (1992) and Savickas, (2011b), who agree that trauma, pain and hurt can never be ignored or made amends for, adversity can be turned into triumph, defeat into victory and loss into gain. This aim can be achieved when people contribute socially to alleviating the hurt and pain of others; by helping people that have suffered to acquire resilience instead of 'accepting defeat.' Whatever I do, I interpret through the lens of and base on the

conceptual framework provided by these four scholars. This framework is based on the following four pillars:

- a. Every life story is defined by the pain suffered by its author.
- b. For our survival, it is essential to turn this pain into a social contribution, a gift to others who have suffered a comparable 'fate.'
- c. Healing is brought about by narrating or telling our story to empathetic career counselors and other valued audiences in our life such as parents, partners and friends.
- d. Repeated reflection under the thoughtful eyes of skilled career counselors has the power to heal brokenness and psychic wounding.

**NAJP:** What have I neglected to ask?

**KM:** Maybe. Is there any resistance to the new approach? The value of qualitative approaches to career counseling, the power of a combined quantitative+qualitative, the consequent development and application of narrative intervention theories and the accompanying strategies and assessment instruments in career counseling are no longer denied. Yet, some people do not seem to appreciate the need for a paradigm shift in career counseling.

They argue that there is no real need for a changed approach to career counseling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not necessary for career counselors to rethink their approaches to career counseling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

They also argue that data are insufficient to suggest that narrative approaches facilitate 'better' counseling outcomes or results than non-narrative approaches. I respect these practitioners' points of view. Of course, in terms of their logical positivist conceptual framework or lens, they are right. It is rarely easy to move beyond an approach that has served one well over time, that one feels comfortable with and that has brought one success (defined from their perspective).

I am guided by Phares' (1992) warning that our primary allegiance in career counseling should never be to any particular theoretical approach. Instead, it should be aimed at finding the best ways to be useful to our clients. I believe that we should endeavour to use the best elements in all approaches.

Clients are seen as authors of their evolving career and life stories, capable of displaying self-sufficiency, self-reliance, resourcefulness and adaptiveness. Career counselors should consistently emphasize their unique emotions, cognitions, volition and passions; the importance of an active, movement-oriented approach as opposed to a passive approach and labelling clients who are unwilling to take the necessary action to move forward as patients.

Likewise, career counselors have to move forward in terms of their own theory and practice. They should reflect constantly on their reflections when they offer career counselling to clients by not only listening to clients and allowing them to reflect repeatedly but also reflecting on their own situation in relation to what and how they are doing.

Qualitative techniques can augment quantitative techniques and vice versa to demonstrate the way in which contemporary theories and goals in career counselling can be merged to provide a useful and contemporaneous conceptual lens and framework for the interpretation, explanation and guiding of career-related behaviour to help people deal effectively with repeated transitions as and when they occur (Di Fabio, 2012; Duarte 2010; Maree, 2010d; Savickas et al., 2009). Ultimately, we should enable clients to advise themselves while considering the advice and opinions of others.

In the final instance, our purpose should be to turn the experience of administering and receiving career counselling into what Epston described as “the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve [offering] the possibility of a new beginning” (O’Hanlon, 1994, p. 3). Ultimately, we should aim to convert hurt or pain into hope, failure into victory and despair into hope.

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