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Life-designing: Objectives, processes, instruments

This article intends to reflect on career counselling, considering three main objectives. The first objective is to demonstrate that there is a gap between career counselling theories and counselling realities. The second objective is to outline some of the theoretical insights that are currently being debated around the new paradigm of Life-designing and present the paradigm's relevance to counselling interventions: to address counselling as a process of continuous interactions which helps in the resolution of problems, locates the process of decision-making within a systematic and realistic frame and brings the individual exigencies into alignment with those of the contexts in which the individuals act, develop and live. Thus, the framework is structured to be life-long, holistic, contextual and preventive. The third objective concerns the process of counselling according to the Life-designing perspectives: theoretical reflection fosters and underpins intervention methods and techniques which promote the development of self-knowledge and facilitate (or inhibit) the decision-making processes. The narratives and activities developed by individuals, rather than test scores and profile interpretations, are the crucial methodological focal points. By way of illustrating this mode of practising career counselling, a case study is reported and discussed after the outline of Life-designing career counselling methods. In conclusion, some of the challenges that this creates for career counsellors concerned with these issues are discussed.

Key words: career counselling; counsellor training

Introduction

Considering the observable realities of change, therein the deep-running and comprehensive transformations in the nature of work and employment, we cannot avoid concluding that change must also take place in the traditional career counselling interventions, and especially in approaches which are commonly employed in interviews administered (as a psychological instrument) during the counselling process. The changes signal many important transitions in the field in which career counsellors work or will work.

Life-designing (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck, Van Vianen, 2009) – a recently proposed paradigm for career counselling – requires reflection on the self and the environment, receptivity to feedback

and the specific capacity to imagine possible selves. These requirements pose a challenge to career practitioners, who need to develop other and new competencies. Given the nature of the on-going changes and the related demands of intervention (in particular, interviews conducted in the counselling process), it seems obvious that new counselling relationships must be built, based on individual narratives and stories, and dialogue must be constructed to enable the clients to express emotions, reveal their lives, discover reasons for changing them and identify the salient elements of their selves.

The process of counselling informed by the Life-designing perspectives is based on co-construction of identity and conduction in which each party (the counsellor and the client) acts upon and reacts to the other. The success of such a relationship is largely predicated on the adequate training of counsellors. Some of the challenges that this creates for career counsellors concerned with these issues are illustrated below in the discussion of a case study; at the same time, the case study is used to highlight the counsellor's core competencies (what the counsellor is or should be capable of).

Application of the Life-designing model in career interventions must be preceded and underpinned by reflection on three vital issues.

One of them is a different way of approaching narrativity (Savickas M. L., Nota L., Rossier J., Dauwalder J-P., Duarte M. E., Guichard J., Soresi S., Van Esbroeck R., 2009) and making sense of narratives when one is listening to another (in a counselling setting). Another pertains to counsellor training which aims to attribute an active and dynamic meaning to the process of life construction (Duarte, 2009a). The third is identity-related and addresses the challenge posed by self-scrutiny: looking into oneself to discover who one really is, rather than complying with what others expect one to be. In conclusion, it is indicated in what ways these various issues intersect and overlap.

The gap between career counselling theories and counselling realities

Career counselling has been traditionally linked to positivist epistemology. However, the traditional concept of counselling may be confusing and counterproductive now as it seeks to modify the counselee's behaviour according to a pre-defined model, which can be seen in a relative disregard of conceptual clarity in favour of correspondence between theoretical propositions and evidence provided by empirical observations. Fashioning counselling interventions in this way is unfeasible and misguided in the world of "liquid" modernity, in which the human being needs openness and flexibility to successfully confront the artificiality of technology. The gap between career counselling theories and counselling realities still persists, partly due to the utilisation of prior, pre-constructed models. Career counselling defined as an objective process underpinned by and assessable through the scientific

methods of data collection is no more in tune with the new realities in which we are steeped. As Alicja Kargulowa (2012) points out, “apparently, the activities of counsellors rely on the previously accumulated, but not always critically verified knowledge” (Kargulowa, 2012, p. 211).

Indeed, it is an accepted fact that knowledge is fundamental to the development of both societies and individuals; it is also a well-known fact that technology has been and is instrumental to the dissemination of such knowledge. However, it is, crucially, intellectual capital, which fosters values and lays grounds for the structural changes in the economic, knowledge and communication systems, that essentially contributes to a paradigmatic shift in counselling concepts and practices. The shift involves abandoning the restricted score-based analytical perspective of logical positivism for the sake of a constructivism-informed career counselling approach which proposes that counselling interventions are a (critical) process of individual meaning-making

Drawing on Immanuel Kant (1781/1996) and his critical discussion of empiricism and rationalism, we can distinguish between *criticism* and *critique*. In the Kantian perspective, criticism denotes a critical analysis of the possibility, origin, value, laws and limits of rational knowledge. It is a philosophical position which holds that the principle is independent of any individual or, above all, of any constraints that sensory experience imposes on knowledge. On the other hand, *critique* – stemming from the Latin *critica* and derived from the Greek notion of *kritikê tékne*, that is, “critical art,” designating the ability to separate, judge, and decide – is a voluntary, intrinsically individual act, an activity of reasoning which sets out to distinguish the true from the false. Briefly, it is an act of the mind prompted by a doubt about the “truth” of a given situation (Duarte, 2012).

Clearly, career counselling has been and still is profoundly influenced by the tradition of empiricism, and that is one of the reasons why theory and the realities of practice are still separated by a substantial distance. The theories and practices that were developed by the end of the 20th century to deal with the contingencies of the period are not viable in our new, mutating reality. At present, our priority does not lie in setting paradigmatic norms and standards; instead, we seek to examine critically the past theories in view of the new realities of the 21st century.

In the “satellite communication era (...) the role the networked counselling plays can be fully comprehended and explained only through *collective* effort of both researchers and reflective practitioners” (Kargulowa, 2012, p. 212). This is an important thought worth restating and emphasising. In such a collective effort, researchers and/or practitioners may compare, for example, the framework of interventions informed by theories and prediction techniques worked out when employment and environment were still stable – e.g. Super’s developmental theory (Super, 1990) and the model of intervention based on it – with those which draw on the critical perspective and view the individual as involved in continuous, economic and cultural context-specific processes. Such a comparison may help ascertain

which of the approaches has a greater potential to create valuable counselling models in contemporary society characterised by an uncertainty-fraught labour market. While the developmental psychologists seek to equip the individual with a set of instruments which, eventually, will allow him/her to anticipate decisions, in the new, constructivist approach (Savickas, 2005), the psychologists work towards construction, or rather co-construction, as a source of individual identity change, reinforcement and satisfaction.

Briefly, taking a glance at a yawning divide between career counselling theories and reality, researchers and practitioners could inquire if intervention models based on the Life- designing approach are capable of bridging that gap. In this context, success requires and entails identifying the individual narrative and reviewing it repeatedly. Success involves also defining the meaning of the narrative through an analysis of individually processed information, naming and exploring the context, understanding the distinct motivational factors and devoting attention to each individual.

Life-designing and counselling interventions

The Life-designing model endorses five presuppositions about people and their occupational lives: (1) possibilities are contextually embedded; (2) processes are dynamic; (3) progression is non-linear; (4) there are multiple perspectives; and (5) patterns are inherently personal (Savickas, et al., 2009).

In Life-designing career counselling, the very process of constructing and conducting counselling, which is grounded on reciprocal interactions of the parties involved, entails co-creation of a narrative. Adequate specialist training of counselors is an essential factor in the success of such a relationship. As opposed to the traditional approaches, in the Life-designing framework individuals are crucially seen as people who construct their selves based on how they perceive others' reactions to them, while those *others* are not separate and disengaged out there. In turn, a sense of the self-formed in this way – channelled through the others' feedback – serves as a basis for individuals to organise their understanding of life, including their work life (Guichard, 2009).

The Life-designing framework for counselling emphatically conceptualises counselling as a process of continuous interaction which is inextricably intertwined with emotions and feelings, helps in the resolution of problems, locates the process of decision-making within a systematic and realistic frame and allows aligning individual exigencies with those of the contexts in which the individuals act, develop and live (Duarte, 2011). Consequently, the framework is structured to be life-long, holistic, contextual and preventive (Savickas, et al., 2009).

To be *life-long* means not only to help the individual acquire particular skills for dealing with a particular change at a particular moment, but also – first of all,

perhaps – to determine what kind of skills and knowledge ought to be altogether acquired for the life-long development. Consequently, counselling needs to address a whole range of issues, therein, particularly, selecting a suitable method and a proper specialist to best further the problem-solving process as well as choosing the fitting environment and the most propitious moment in which to intervene.

A *holistic* approach presupposes assisting and helping individuals whose problems involve diverse combinations of career problems and/or personal issues. In this model, the goal is to design life as a whole rather than to simply focus on problem situations or on moments when necessary work-related decisions are looming. Also “career” is a comprehensive notion which goes far beyond paid employment as such.

As a *contextual* approach, Life-designing counselling devotes special attention to settings, environments and contexts in which individuals live. All of them are relevant, no matter whether they are connected with the past or the present: for the self-construction process to succeed, all life roles, stages and events must be thoroughly explored.

Some case studies confirm the feasibility and utility of this intervention model and its application in counselling practice. They show also that the approach is explicative rather than explorative or descriptive, making it possible to understand the intra-individual variability and to fully recognise the importance of contextual variables, in particular the socio-cultural contexts which can help define the role of counsellors. This purpose is furthered by the work done by Bilon & Kargul (2012), who clarify the role contexts play in comprehending verbal utterances.

The research agenda for Life-designing interventions ascribes the greatest value to bottom-up research. It proposes that the conditions and circumstances in which Life-designing can facilitate re-defining one’s vocational identity, construed as embedded in social processes specific to a given culture, may be best captured through conducting a wide variety of case studies. Observations conveyed in such case studies may help understand a client’s reference framework, at least the one described by the counsellor. Other relevant and frequently used Life-designing methodologies include also discourse analysis and narrative or ethnographic analysis (Savickas, 2012). Such analyses can certainly help comprehend the influence that the cultural contexts exert on the process of career construction. The alliance of cross-cultural and ethnographic approaches is a highly promising development which creates opportunities for important advances in the field of career studies, by permitting, for example, to examine in-depth how cultural aspects affect broader career guidance issues.

Another task that emerges for us is to launch research to identify the underlying processes which must be dealt with in Life-designing interventions, especially in relation to work roles. However, the direct assessment of these processes poses a major difficulty as such processes are effective only temporarily and largely latent or inaccessible. For this reason, it is urgent to conduct studies based on a combination

of methods and to devise a research strategy that draws information from a variety of disciplines, thereby increasing the external validity of findings as similar results would come from several sources. At the same time, such research schemes could yield multifaceted findings and, consequently, aid to fully grasp the complexity of the problem. The promotion of diverse perspectives, techniques and methods of research contributes to the increased and broadened understanding of the individual, context-dependent and differentially dynamic construction of life projects.

Briefly, the co-construction perspective is integrated into the paradigm of Life-designing, and, consequently, counselling interventions are made around the self-construction process. What is at stake in this venture?

The fundamental challenge for both counsellors and clients is to transform the idea, or the model, into reality, or rather, to transform the concept into a real object, which is relied on by the individual as a construction instrument. This involves first and foremost motivation, as the construction of virtually anything is based on motivation, and motivation leads to action. In brief, the model does not stipulate its own implementation strategies: there is only a decision for implementation, for choice and for involvement. Whenever one concentrates on implementation as a skill or a competency, the non-rational and non-formable aspects of the human condition are most likely to be ignored (Duarte, 2010). All formulae and all descriptions are just concepts, words, ideas and theories.

What is it, then, that makes counselling interventions real? The answer is: involvement, perseverance and commitment. They are dictated by a personal choice rather than by a decision of strategic nature. The theories and concepts that each individual wishes to make real and the *I* that exists in each of us belong to two different worlds: even if we agree that something can be described, does that automatically mean that it exists? For instance, in a working relationship between the counsellor and the client what really matter are life stories and not the concepts. In other words, the human being is not an idea: s/he is human because s/he is alive, and what is alive can die when transformed into a disembodied idea. Therefore, the key to success may lie in making something happen, that is, in constructing, or even better, in co-constructing (reality). And constructing entails having a vision (Duarte, 2012).

To sum up, the short scrutiny of theoretical considerations as related to counselling practice, focused on the “liaison” between the theoretical and the intervention, necessitates reflection on the characteristics and skills of each individual. The point is to make sure that the individual does not lose his/her specific position and quality of an active and substantial link within the historic chain from which s/he emerges but sustains and develops him/herself. With the knowledge derived, among others, from his/her own experiences and interpretations of them, s/he can ensure the continuity of this very chain, projecting it into the future.

Intervention methods and techniques

The third objective of this article concerns the process of counselling according to the Life-designing perspectives, i.e. constructing and conducting the counselling process in which each party acts upon and reacts to the other. The success of such a relationship is predicated upon adequate specialist training of counsellors. As opposed to the traditional approaches, in the Life-designing framework individuals are believed to construct their selves, drawing on their perceptions of others' reactions to them, with those others, importantly, not being separate or relegated out there. In turn, a sense of the self – channelled through the others' feedback – provides individuals with grounds to organise their understanding of life, including their work life (Guichard, 2009).

According to the Life-designing perspective, when a counsellor meets a client, the client is not separate from the counsellor and may affect his/her behaviour. The reverse is also true: the counsellor likewise influences the client. Consequently, an inter-dependent relationship is created in which nothing that perceptibly happens to one of the parties remains indifferent to the other. Therein, we witness the relevance of identity as a process of social construction which emerges from a moulded continuum and takes a new direction as interpersonal relations are being produced and new identity constructs are being fashioned.

We might ask, then, how it is at all possible to propose that collective well-being depends on one having to renounce one's personality and become enclosed within some social confines, against one's own will and nature itself, within a rigid space which is functional, on the one hand, but, on the other, conditions and curtails one's creativity. Given this, the essence of the counselling process can be seen as the unfolding of the actual *I*: its point and sense lie in understanding how people interpret and represent reality and perform the tasks that the context presents to them, what meanings they give to it, and how such representations interact in their personal history (Duarte, 2012).

To sum up, counselling integrates three broad fields: (1) personality in relation to differing individual traits; (2) the process of assembling structures to promote adaptability (development stems from adaptation to the contexts); and (3) the analysis of life themes in search of motivation (Duarte, 2009b). The major challenge for counselling is to harmonise the self-construction perspective inscribed in Life-designing with the self-co-construction process.

To recognise and define all aspects of a social system is a sheer impossibility both in theory and in practice. Therefore, to reflect on what is being done is at least as important as to act as such. In counselling practice, it is crucial that the counsellor should learn, keep quiet and listen. Another challenge the counsellor must rise to is fostering such conditions which would encourage the client to affirm his/her uniqueness, feel at ease with him/herself as an active party and, thus, contribute to the construction of a community (Duarte, 2009b). As a result, career counsellors

need, ultimately, to co-construct a counselling style that integrates their unique life story with the themes and narrative of the counselling profession, that is, to fit the profession into their lives and their lives into the profession.

The Life-designing model envisages an intervention process consisting of six stages (Savickas, et al., 2009), which should be defined by, and seen as dependent on, the experiences of the client. The first stage focuses on the construction of a “working alliance” (a contract) as a prerequisite to identifying the client’s problem in its main context. The client’s expectations concerning help that the counsellor can provide should be clarified as early as in the first session.

The second stage involves the mapping and exploration of the client’s system of subjective identity forms (Guichard, 2009) so as to analyse the ways in which the client sees him/herself in the various arenas or domains of life. The analysis covers the past, present and future expectations of the client.

In the third stage, the main objective is to extend and open the client’s perspectives: the sheer fact of the client’s story being re-told transforms the implicit into the explicit, makes the latent graspable and, thereby, allows greater objectivity and clarity.

In the fourth stage, an opportunity is created for the client to embed his/her problem into a newly told version of the story. This stage can be considered complete when the client has attained a synthesis in which s/he is able to move forward with a plan of action – a plan that embodies the client’s expectations and articulates a possible new “self.”

The fifth stage consists in specifying and selecting the intended identity-related activities so as to devise a concrete plan of action with clearly defined objectives, inclusive of engaging in new experience and opportunities to tell the client’s new story to people with whom s/he associates.

Finally, the sixth stage is devoted to a short- and medium-term follow-up.

Below, a case study employing the Life-designing framework for career counselling is reported in order to illustrate the concepts briefly outlined above. The case study emphatically encapsulates also the core counsellor competencies (i.e. what the counsellor is capable of) as defined by Dauwalder & Guichard (2011).

Case study

The participant, John (name changed), is a 44-year-old male, married, father of 2 children: a 10-year-old girl and a 7-year-old boy. After 5 years at university, aged 25, he graduated in Economics and found a job at a consulting company, where he worked for 10 years. Following the birth of his first child, he took up a job at a bank, because it offered “a more tranquil lifestyle, with a defined schedule and guaranteed stability.” Recently, he requested a year of unpaid leave because he could no longer handle the “daily routine and the constant pressure from the director.” John has

turned to counselling because he was confused about what direction to take in his life, but he was certain that he could not return to the same banking department. He has asked the counsellor to assist him in choosing his next move, while his wife has encouraged him to seek help.

Procedure

All sessions were recorded, with the consent of the client. They took about one hour each and were held at the same location. Twelve sessions were held over the course of three months. In the first stage (as defined in the model above), one session was held, while four were held in the second, two in the third, three in the fourth and one in the fifth. In the sixth stage, one session was also held as the first follow-up session.

Stage one: Help the client become aware of what are the main domains of his life

In the first session, in which John stated: "I want you to change the direction of my life," he had it explained to him that it would not be the counsellor's responsibility to make change or any other related decision. The idea of the "working alliance" was clarified together with the tasks to be performed by the counsellor and the counselee: each set of the stimuli (questions or requests that encourage the client to share his/her life story) provided by the counsellor, as well as John's responses and reflexes, would be subject to a joint reflection aimed specifically at identifying the main contexts of each individual issue. The following objectives were set for the counselling process:

- ♦ to understand the word "direction" and the context in which it was being applied;
- ♦ to identify the client's life roles in which he felt more or less satisfied; and
- ♦ to explore other work possibilities unrelated to the client's university training.

The client was asked to describe his usual day. Typically, he performed a few work/consultancy-related tasks, took the children to and from school when not working and went to the gymnasium frequently. The client liked working as a consultant in Africa, where he was "always made very welcome. I already have some friends there and I feel like I am really helping people and countries that are currently developing." He liked spending time around other people and enjoyed the lifestyle he could afford as a consultant, but disliked the prospect of returning to work at the bank, where the daily routine was fixed and the director had the same arrogant attitude.

The first stage could be summarised as identification of the problem in its main contexts. John realised that his work-related difficulties were linked to two contexts:

firstly, compliance with the routine daily working schedule and obedience to the orders given by a person for whom he had neither respect nor admiration; and, secondly, the feeling that the work he performed was useless, because, as John put it, “the work done at the bank produces no visible results.”

As already mentioned, the first stage focuses on constructing a “working alliance” as relevant to identification of the scope and main contexts of the client’s problem. The client’s expectations of help and the counsellor’s capacity to provide it should be clarified in the very first session. This implies that the competencies required from the counsellor fall into the categories of operational, social and personal competencies (Dauwalder & Guichard, 2011). The counsellor’s operational competencies include, among others:

- (a) clarification of the client’s expectations
- (b) establishing the framework and the contract of intervention
- (c) conducting an interview
- (d) making a synthesis
- (e) devising an action plan.

The counsellor’s social competencies comprise, for example:

- (a) building a relationship
- (b) fostering the climate of trust and confidence
- (c) being available for the client.

Stage two: Exploration of the client’s current system of subjective identity forms

According to Guichard (2009), an identity form can be defined “as a given way to see oneself and others in a certain context” (p. 253). This definition served as a starting point for a dialogue that involved the process of self-description including the way in which John saw himself at that moment, his representations of his past and his expectations for the future.

The dialogue focused, among others, on establishing the interdependences between temporal perspectives in John’s life and revealed an ensemble of pivotal points in the client’s past experiences and the complex grid of links to the current moment, such as (1) the choice of university and degree under pressure from his family; (2) attribution of importance to the roles that involve interaction (“it is important, for me personally, that I deal with people”); (3) a deep need to see results produced by his work, (“after work, I enjoy talking about what I have done in the office”); and (4) the relationship between his experiences and expectations (“I have always preferred working in the field to working in the office with a stack of paperwork.”).

All those represented an almost complete dissonance between the client’s possible self and his ascribed employee role. A similarly jarring dissonance was revealed between his engagements outside the bank and his work role in the bank (“when I am in the bank I feel unhappy and really want to leave, but when I am,

for example, giving training, I feel fine.”). The self which the client adopted was one more consistent with his family’s, in particular his parents’ views, whereas another possible self would be one that works within a different dynamic and engages in closer contact and interaction with people. The client likes his family life, loves his wife and children and is a hospitable man eager to entertain friends at home. He has an interest in sports, particularly rugby, and enjoys political discussions. His childhood idol was a famous Portuguese doctor.

Summing up, John’s identity frame is related to his upper-class background. The pressure that John felt from his parents is bound up with his social origin. His lifestyle, behaviours and modes of action diverge from those in which he was born and raised (his father is an economist and owns a business, his mother is a successful lawyer, and his brother is a judge). The mapping of John’s identity form and the organisation of his current self and its function in the world of work reveal an incompatibility within the characteristics that define him as a person. The relationship between the field in which he works, the person he is and some of the dreams which he has failed to fulfil is fraught with inconsistency.

The second stage, as already mentioned, involves the mapping and exploration of the system of subjective identity forms of the client (Guichard, 2009) so as to analyse the form in which the client sees him/herself in the various arenas or domains of life. The analysis covers the past, present and future expectations of the client.

If this venture is to succeed, what competencies must the counsellor possess? Certainly, they include operational competencies as well as social and personal competencies. The former comprise the capacity to (a) identify the dimensions to investigate; (b) choose the appropriate evaluation methods; (c) conduct the interview; (d) make a synthesis; and (e) guide and support the person in the process. The latter involve skills necessary to: (a) build a relation; (b) foster the climate of confidence; (c) be available for the client; (d) conduct self-assessment; (e) set the priorities; and (f) cope with stress and conflicts.

Stage three: Open perspectives

Employing the constructionist approach and methodology proposed by Savickas (2005), the counsellor re-told the client’s life story drawing on the recorded sessions. The narrative revealed that John had chosen an economics major, instead of a degree involving a higher level of interaction (e.g., medicine or psychology), striving to achieve professional stability rather than personal satisfaction. He opted for the illusory social recognition rather than for self-development and gave precedence to security offered by the organisation over the effort of constructing his own personal project. All that added up to a choice made out of obligation rather than out of personal preference.

And, indeed, John admitted that he would have liked to have been a doctor but never told anybody about that wish. He also noted that he had, wrongly, assumed that a job at the bank would make him happier by enabling him to spend more time with his children and to give priority to his family. He also revealed that he had not told his family that he had consulted a doctor; and, poignantly, he sought medical advice because before returning to the bank he had suffered a panic attack, which prompted him to request a period of unpaid leave.

Re-told and re-examined in this way, John's story made it possible for him to re-read the narrative of his life not as one in which "a man failed at work," but as one in which he needed to discover a new way to live his work role. This resulted in John deciding to consider alternative employment within the bank (probably moving departments) and to keep his position as a consultant, where he "earn[ed] a lot of money for each project" and, consequently, had more time to devote to other issues. It was via the dialogue that perspectives were worked out and brought into alignment, an alignment which was rooted in John's newly re-told and accepted story.

To sum up, at the end of this stage, what remained was a revision of the story which was necessarily open-ended so that other details could be added to it via the same process, that is, through John sharing a detail with the counsellor and the counsellor, in the following sessions, aiding to clarify and objectify that detail. The repeated revisions would always aim to produce and reflect on new ways in which to look at the biographical details. The main issues worked through in this phase included identification of the various *selves* discernible in the re-told story, recognition of skills and stimulation of the development of such skills which fostered the re-focusing of John's self-image as a worker.

As already mentioned, the third stage aims primarily to extend and open the client's perspectives. The sheer fact that the client's story is being re-told transforms the implicit into the explicit, making the latent graspable and allowing greater objectivity and clarity. We could again enumerate a set of competencies required of the counsellor at this stage. They would include operational competencies such as:

- (a) taking the balance of the situation
- (b) analysing and interpreting the client's needs
- (c) conducting the interview
- (d) making syntheses
- (e) assessing the progress of the project
- (f) evaluating the effect of the message.

The relevant social and interpersonal competencies would involve:

- (a) maintaining the personal equilibrium
- (b) observing professional deontology
- (c) being available for the client
- (d) conducting self-assessment
- (e) displaying flexibility and adaptability
- (f) coping with stress and conflicts.

Stage four: Place the problem in a new story.

The re-casting of the client's situation was also conducive to re-interpreting his expectations and the possible outcomes of his current circumstances: At this stage, John realised: "After all, I am not such a bad worker, I just work in the wrong place." As a result of having his story re-told, the client also gained a new perspective and a new identity form while the notion of "direction" was invested with a new significance. Importantly, with this new meaning the word connoted both barriers and ways of overcoming them, designating an inner battle involved in John's work-related decision-making.

Eventually, John began to understand why he had not chosen to study medicine. It was caused by laziness and a lack of dedication to learning hard enough to achieve grades which would make him eligible for enrolment in the medical school. Still, it came easier to him to blame family pressure as the chief factor in his choice of economics.

At that point in his life, John could rely on his wife's unconditional support in pursuit of his dreams. Despite that, he did not regard medicine as a feasible career option any more. There were several reasons for that, according to him, such as admission requirements, personal circumstances and the enormous effort that medical studies would demand ("After all, I have never really liked studying and right now I think it is possible for me to discover other alternatives."). John's subjective identity forms were, therefore, re-examined for identification of the barriers he faced and assessment of the support that he had in achieving his new objectives. Other possibilities in the field of health care were also discussed.

John's major work-related problem was put in a new perspective that focused on the type of worker that he had seen himself as being throughout his life. When John stated that "It is possible for me to do other things and to do them in a different way," it was decided that other available options would be discussed in the next session.

To sum up, in the fourth stage, it was determined what could be done to alter the client's work role so as to make sure that he did not feel less happy at work. A new identity was selected for him in which the novel components and the old elements (e.g. a possible return to the same type of work) were articulated so as to develop new activities supporting the client in coping at work.

As already indicated, in the fourth stage opportunities are created for the client to locate his/her problem in a newly told story. This stage is successfully completed when the client attains a synthesis in which s/he is able to move forward with a plan of action – a plan that embodies the client's expectations and that articulates a possible new "self."

What competencies are required of the counsellor at this stage? They, again, fall into the categories of operational, social and personal competencies. The operational competencies include, for example:

- (a) taking the balance of the situation
 - (b) analysing and interpreting the client's needs
 - (c) conducting the interview
 - (d) making syntheses
 - (e) assessing the progress of the project
 - (f) evaluating the effect of the message
 - (g) assessing the helping process
 - (h) updating the "dossier"
- And the social and personal competencies involve, among others:
- (a) maintaining the personal equilibrium
 - (b) observing professional deontology
 - (c) being available for the client
 - (d) conducting self-assessment
 - (e) displaying flexibility and adaptability
 - (f) coping with stress and conflicts
 - (g) time management
 - (h) setting the priorities.

Stage five: Specify activities and actualise the identity.

The fifth stage commenced with designing a plan of action. John was confident that he would be capable of getting involved in an active search for solutions. The counsellor told John's new story and, in doing so, highlighted two important points: what John was experiencing at the moment and what John desired at the moment.

Based on those two crucial points, two columns were compiled under relevant headings, each containing short statements, for example:

1. *currently experienced* – "Do not want to return to the same bank department."
2. *currently desired* – "To continue working in the field of consultancy and to enrol in further training."

John definitely displayed resolve to seek new experience. After the conversation in which health-care related employment opportunities were discussed, he researched medium-term course options and signed up for a preparatory course for training in physiotherapy.

The objectives outlined in the first session were also revisited. John's self-reflection and re-interpretation of his past experiences enabled him to evaluate the aspects of his current life in which he felt tolerably satisfied and highlighted his urgent need to embark on new projects.

To sum up, in the fifth stage, several specific actions to be undertaken by John were selected. They included applying to the human resources manager for re-assignment to another department in the bank, fixing the date of enrolment in the training course and telling his new story to his parents. John also drew up a list

of the main characteristics of his new identity, containing such features as, for example, a positive attitude to and anticipated pleasure at starting the physiotherapy course. At the end of this stage, the counsellor gave John a written copy of the plan of action.

As implied before, in the fifth stage, the identity-related activities are selected and specified to devise a concrete plan of action with clearly defined objectives, such as involvement in new experiences and creation of opportunities to tell the client's new story to the people with whom s/he associates.

What competencies are required of the counsellor at this stage? They are, again, operational, social and personal and, since they form the same set as in the previous stage, they do not need restating. The only additional operational competency distinct to stage five is the capacity to devise a plan of action.

Follow-up as stage six

The first session of this stage was held a month later. John was enthusiastic and had already executed some elements of the plan of action established in the fifth stage. He had not submitted an application for transfer within the bank, because he wanted to try to prolong his period of unpaid leave for another six months. He stated that he enjoyed studying new things, although it was proving difficult to harmonise his studies, family life and consultancy work. A decision was made to hold another session in two months' time.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates the viability of the intervention model based on the Life-designing perspective. The applied approach was explicative rather than explorative or descriptive. Instead of attempting to fit the client into a normative pattern, it gave precedence to his intra-individual variability. The contextual variables of the case permitted an assessment that focused more on particular issues, for example, possibilities of obtaining an unpaid leave in Portugal, while sustaining the same working relationship was considered fundamental.

Revealing as this case study is, more studies of this kind are certainly needed to verify the utility of the Life-designing counselling framework. This is in line with the bottom-up research model proposed by the research agenda for Life-designing interventions. As already suggested, the conditions in which Life-designing fosters a re-definition of the client's vocational identity as defined by culture-specific social processes can be best grasped through conducting of a wide variety of case studies. Observations recorded in such studies facilitate understanding of the client's and the counsellor's reference frameworks. Such analysis can certainly help appreciate the influence that the cultural context has on the process of career construction. A great step forward can be made in the field of career studies if cross-cultural

approaches are combined with ethnographic frameworks to capture the impact of cultural aspects on career guidance issues.

Briefly, we should engage in extensive research to identify the underlying processes to be addressed by Life-designing interventions, especially in relation to work roles (Duarte, 2009b). However, as implied above, such processes prove notoriously difficult to assess directly since they are effective only temporarily, latent or inaccessible. In this context, it seems pertinent to develop research frameworks combining various methods and to devise research strategies that draw information from a variety of disciplines. This would increase the external validity of findings as similar results would come from several sources, providing at the same time more information to fully comprehend the complexity of the problem. The promotion of diverse perspectives, techniques and methods would contribute to the increased and broadened understanding of the construction of individual, context-specific and differentially dynamic life projects.

To finish with, we could ask whether it is necessary to construct a model for the training of career counsellors. The reflections presented above seem to substantiate this postulate, reminding at the same time that a set of variables should always be borne in mind when constructing models of counsellor training (or self-construction). In designing possible models, ample attention should be given to such issues as:

- ◆ Who are the actors in counselling?
- ◆ What structure should be adopted?
- ◆ Which strategy should be defined?
- ◆ Which process should be developed and what results are to be obtained?

For these queries to be answered and for these issues to materialise in practice, it is also necessary to identify obstacles, formulate a training agreement and work on the details involved (Duarte, 2009b).

The ultimate goal is, after all, to help people in the process of constructing their lives.

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