



# Constructing career through narrative

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to explain how constructivism addresses career as narrative. First, the narrative approach to career is briefly contrasted with traditional ones. Next, the theory of narrative is outlined, and some of the relevance of narrative for understanding career is presented. The notion of constructivism is then discussed from the perspective of showing that it seems to be an adequate means for conceptualizing narrative. Following this discussion, the author illustrates the contribution that constructivism, via narrative, brings to career theory, research, and practice. He concludes with the presentation of some perspectives regarding the constructivist/narrative approach in each of these areas.

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## 1. Introduction

For many years, in courses that I taught on theories of career development, I had the opportunity (like many other teachers of such courses, I believe) to read papers in which my students described their own career development, interpreting it in reference to some of the theories and research studies in the field, and drawing out the prospects that appeared most plausible to them with regard to their future career. There was strong evidence in these papers of their value to my students with regard not only to conceptual integration, but also the opportunity for growth, personal integration, and transformation that they provided. Sometime ago, I examined the potential contributions of biographical-hermeneutical approaches to the study of career (Bujold, 1990). More recently, I participated as one of the subjects in a biographical study of six Canadian counselor educators (Larsen, 1999). All these activities, I

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would say, have something to do, each one in a specific way, with narrative, which reflects my interest in this particular topic, and which has contributed to make me more sensitive to the importance of narrative for our understanding of career.

Since, as we shall see, we cannot consider narrative without having recourse to the concept of constructivism, both concepts will be examined here. More specifically, I will discuss, in this article, the notions of narrative and constructivism in relation to career, from the perspective of showing how constructivism addresses career as narrative and thus contributes to career theory, research and practice. To this end, I will refer to sources in which the topics of narrative and constructivism have been addressed from either a theoretical, research, or applied point of view. Most of these writings bear directly on career, whereas others do not, although they have obvious implications for the field of vocational behavior. Because of space limitations, however, the discussion presented here will focus on the contributions that appear the most helpful in clarifying the relations between narrative, constructivism, and career.

## **2. Narrative and traditional approaches to career**

Career development theories, including the emerging ones, are essentially in the objectivist or positivist tradition, as one can see in recent texts (e.g., Bujold & Gingras, 2000; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Yet McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2001) remark that career choice is “more multilayered and internally contradictory than univariate studies of vocational choice would suggest” (p. xviii).

The narrative approach with regard to career is clearly different from the classic conceptualization of occupational choice as a process of matching the individual's traits with job requirements. In spite of the fact that this trait-factor approach is, and will remain, useful from a theoretical, research, and applied point of view, it obviously does not take into account all the complexity of career behavior.

As well, the conceptualization of narrative substantially differs from what other traditional approaches to career, including developmental conceptions, social, economic, and cultural perspectives, or social learning theories, propose. For example, one of the evaluation criteria of a good theory, in the traditional perspective, is its capacity to explain, and predict a reasonable number of phenomena. Career development, however, through the multiple decisions that it requires and the risks that it involves, and because of the individuals' unique ways of dealing with obstacles, unforeseen events, various circumstances, chance, and inner conflicts, can be considered, at least in part, as a creative process. And unpredictability is by definition part of every creation. If valid predictions are indeed possible in general terms concerning career behaviors, it must also be acknowledged that the prediction of individual fates is a very risky enterprise. But conceptualizing the individual as a project, for instance, as some authors suggest when discussing narrative, is a departure from traditional ways in career theory.

Besides, human functioning can hardly be understood without having recourse to the notion of paradox. As examples, for some people, a career may be a planned adventure, or a guided improvisation. Others may lose interest in work in spite of the self-actualization opportunities that it provides. While some aspects of such careers

may be explained by using traditional research methods, the paradoxes that they reveal may be more easily tackled by resorting to a narrative approach.

### 3. Narrative

#### 3.1. *The theory of narrative*

An extensive presentation of the vast literature on narrative is beyond the scope of this article. But the way Polkinghorne (1988) presents the core of his argument provides us with some fundamental elements of narrative theory. He writes that

narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful. Thus, the study of human beings by the human sciences needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular (p. 11).

On the basis of writings by Polkinghorne, Larsen (1999) discusses the roles of narrative as both a process and a product. As process, it consists of the meaning making of one's experiences and is a form of self-construction or fluid self-awareness. As product, it is a story. In Larsen's study, the biographies, with the narrators' beliefs and expectations that they reveal, along with the environmental influences that they have been exposed to, are products.

Plot, an important aspect of narrative theory, is the organizing theme of a story. It is around this theme that life events are gathered into the unity of the story, through it that they gain their significance and that their roles are identified. However, in the process of the creation of identity, in which the narrative configuration plays a central role, the plot must constantly be revised in order to configure the new events happening in a person's life (Polkinghorne, 1988).

In a line of thought similar to Polkinghorne's (1988), who sees narratives as ways of organizing events into wholes with beginnings, middles, and ends, Josselson (1995) expresses the view that "personal narrative describes the road to the present and points the way to the future" (p. 35). Further, she adds:

Continuity and change are emplotted in narrative form. A "good-enough" narrative contains the past in terms of the present and points to a future that cannot be predicted, although it contains the elements out of which the future will be created (p. 35).

McAdams (1988) has discussed the concept of narrative as applying to the lives of people and their social environments, and as having a hermeneutical connotation in the sense that human lives may be conceived as texts that researchers must interpret.

#### 3.2. *The relevance of narrative for understanding career*

Identity is an obviously important concept in career theory. Vocational identity, for instance, is related to constructive beliefs about career decision-making, to career

self-efficacy and career decision-making self-efficacy (Holland, 1997). Identity development, conceptualized in terms of narrative, has been discussed by some authors. In an insightful article, McAdams (1995) proposes that individuals “should be described on at least *three separate* and, at best, *loosely related levels* of functioning” (p. 371). These levels are dispositional traits such as extraversion or dominance (Level I), personal concerns, in reference to motivations, roles, or strategies (Level II), and identity, that is, in terms of one’s unity, uniqueness, and purpose in life (Level III). Identity construction, in McAdams’ view, implies a telling of the self that synthesizes a number of elements in a way that shows their coherence and unity. This construction also suggests that

despite the many changes that attend the passage of time, the self of the past led up to or set the stage for the self of the present, which in turn will lead up to, or set the stage for the self of the future (p. 382).

The form taken by this construction, according to many theorists cited by McAdams (1995), is the life story, and he also proposes “that identity is itself an internalized and evolving life story, or personal myth” (p. 382). Further, he suggests that “identity is the storied self” (p. 385).

In a similar line of thought, Cox and Lyddon (1997) suggest that self as narrative, with its focus on process rather than on substance, is one of the several constructivist conceptions of self following from the postmodern paradigm which proposes that “realities are multiple personal and social constructions, in a constant process of becoming” (p. 204).

The transforming power of narrative is one of the themes emphasized by contributors to the book edited by Josso (2000b), which brings together writings of people from several countries, trained in various disciplines, engaged in research, training or practice with different populations, who share a common interest in the use of narratives. For instance, Lapointe (2000) has observed that by clarifying the meaning of the past, the writing of one’s narrative may create meaning for the present and help to gain more freedom with regard to one’s destiny because of the decoding that the narrative makes possible. Lapointe hypothesizes that the transforming power of narrative resides in the fact that transformation comes with an increased understanding of oneself, this understanding being more than self-knowledge. In the same line of thought, Josso (2000a) conceptualizes the transformation that narrative brings to the life of the narrator essentially in terms of a change occurring in the relationship that the person has with himself or herself and in the way this person considers his or her commitments. Rugira (2000) considers that the transforming power of narrative rests on the existence of a relationship in which a person feels that he or she is acknowledged and accepted.

Löyttyniemi (2001) suggests that a transition that he has observed—a change in a young doctor’s personal and professional life—has taken place in the narration made by this person. Like Denzin, Löyttyniemi believes that personal stories are constructions which do not necessarily correspond to factual truth (a view shared by Peavy, 1998), and that it is indeed only when life transitions are retrospectively told in stories and given meaning that they really happen and transform the self. Löyttyniemi

also suggests that the meaning of a narrative might be given not by the narrator, but instead by the listener, which points to the important responsibility of the listener.

#### 4. Constructivism

In their opening article, the guest editors of this thematic issue address the not so easy problem of the distinction between constructivism and social constructionism, the former being defined as having to do with the internal, cognitive processes involved in the individual's construction of knowledge, and of the world of experience. The epistemological perspective represented by constructivism has to do with the way individuals know, and by implication, find meaning in what they come to know and experience. Although these processes have undoubtedly a social component, they are primarily psychological and individual, whereas in social constructionism, it is the social aspect of the process that dominates, and where group relations, for one thing, take on importance. The meaning that I attach to the term "constructivism" is akin to the definition proposed in this introductory article, and thus, no other definition will be provided here.

##### 4.1. Constructivism and the conceptualization of narrative

If traditional approaches to career fail to help us conceptualize narrative, constructivism, on the other hand, seems to be an adequate means for this purpose, since it is concerned with the individual's construction of meaning, knowledge and experience, and since narrative can be seen as a form of self-construction. In connection with that, writings by Kelly (1955), Peavy (1998), and Pépin (1994) are instrumental in showing more precisely how constructivism can conceptualize narrative, how it underpins this approach.

Through the elaboration of his *Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Kelly (1955) has contributed seminal ideas which have implications for the problems being considered here. Constructs, for Kelly, are representations of the universe. They are ways of construing or "placing an interpretation" (p. 50) upon the world, of seeing the course of events within and outside oneself, and they are also the means for predicting and controlling this course. In this perspective, experience does not consist in the series of events, but in the manner in which events are construed and reconstrued. In his picturesque style, he writes, "To construe is to hear the whisper of recurrent themes in the events that reverberate around us" (p. 76), and this is part of learning.

Kelly (1955) has made clear that constructs are not fixed once and for all. Taking what he called the philosophical position of *constructive alternativism*, he suggested that alternative constructions are always possible for construing the world. In his own words, "no one needs to be the victim of his *biography* [*italics added*]" (p. 15).

Pépin (1994), a social psychologist, proposes a similar conception. For him, constructivism rests on the hypothesis that human beings survive and adapt themselves to their existence insofar as they succeed in giving to their experience a viable form, to the extent that they contain and harness this experience, so to speak, in the

structures of cognition that they impose upon it. He also considers that in a constructivist perspective, the way people construct and foresee their future experience depends on how they actually construct their past experience. The same idea, incidentally, is expressed in poetic terms by Gilles Vigneault, a French–Canadian songwriter, when he sings: “It’s by going up the river that one learns the direction of the water” (my translation) (Vigneault, 1987, track 5).

Peavy (1998) illustrates the way that constructivism underpins narrative. For him, language “is the key ‘meaning-construction’ tool” (p. 40). More specifically, he suggests that “. . . ‘acts of meaning,’ ‘stories,’ ‘narratives,’ ‘metaphors,’ ‘constructs,’ and all the many ways in which meaningful human performance is achieved form the operative basis for constructivist counselling” (p. 40). In Peavy’s view, writing one’s story is a way of constructing an aspect of one’s self, and from the constructivist perspective that he proposes, the story told by a person should not be considered as a statement of objective truth, but rather as this individual’s interpretation of the meaning and sense of his or her life.

In the following sections, I will attempt to portray the contribution that constructivism, *via narrative*, makes to career theory, research, and practice.

## 5. Narrative and career theory

Cochran (1991) and Savickas (2001) are among the authors who have reflected on narrative in relation to career. As Cochran writes: “In story, significant relationships, models, events, resources, memories, anticipations, obstacles, and the like are made to cohere” (p. 20). He suggests that narrative can be used for understanding career decisions, in the sense that such decisions can be understood “not through an objective body of knowledge of theory, but through grasping the story in which it forms a part” (p. 21). For Savickas, career “is how we interpret our work and understand our productive and generative strivings. It embodies continuity and psychosocial change” (p. 311). In this perspective, he suggests that since narratives provide means for articulating needs and goals, purposes and actions, and for discovering life patterns, they are highly relevant for the study of career and, we might add, for elaborating career theory.

Like Cochran (1990), Polkinghorne (1990) sees narrative as a way of organizing events and actions into a whole and showing their significant influence on this unified temporal whole. The explanation offered by narrative, in Polkinghorne’s view, is not to be assessed with respect to its predictability, but rather by considering to what extent it is plausible or suggestive in showing how change takes place in a person’s life (as it is illustrated, for example, in the study conducted by Collin (1990) of men experiencing mid-life career change). This does not deny, however, that narrative can help to reveal the forward movement of this person toward desired ends. As we can see in Polkinghorne’s conception, the focus is on the uniqueness of the person, and as he points out, the suggestive knowledge generated by narratives takes into account the creativity and unpredictability of individuals.

As has been indicated above, identity is a major concept in career theory. With respect to this concept, Lainé (1998) recalls that starting on a job, changing occupation,

being unemployed, and retiring are experiences that allow people to reconstruct the equilibrium between what they were, what they are aspiring to, and the demands of their environment. These experiences are as many transformations, disruptions in the course of life which make necessary identity adjustments and reconstructions. This does not mean, as Lainé points out, that there is nothing stable in identity, for having an identity implies both being in continuity with the heritage from preceding generations and constructing one's own place. But narrating one's life is a way, in Lainé's view, of constructing one's identity. It offers a means of understanding the past in order to go beyond it, of finding the articulation between the influence of external factors and the individual's initiatives. Somewhat paradoxically, Lainé suggests that people become autonomous to the extent that they can identify their dependences, and that narratives can be helpful in this respect. From a theoretical point of view, we may thus look at narrative as something closely related to the construction of identity.

Other authors share the view that life transitions are likely to influence identity. McAdams et al. (2001), for example, consider that people make meaning out of the transitions in their lives through the construction and the sharing of their stories, and suggest that the stories they make and tell about the major transitions in their lives contribute to their identities, affect their perception of the future, and contribute to their positionings in the social and cultural world.

## **6. Narrative and career research**

Cochran (1990) has propounded the use of narrative as a paradigm for career research. For him, story reflects human reality in the sense that life is lived, represented, explained and made understandable, or comprehensible through story. To comprehend, one needs to identify patterns and syntheses in order to see how various elements fall into place, and as Cochran points out, narrative is a way of putting together, or making a configuration of, such elements as people, motives, opportunities, means, places, and events. But he adds that in order for narrative to be a useful approach for career research, much depends "on whether meaning is regarded as the central subject of a career" (p. 78).

In discussing the topic of narrative research, Cochran (1990) distinguishes between narrative construction and narrative criticism. In the former case, the problem faced is the construction of sound and trustworthy narratives, whereas in the latter, the researcher's challenge is to bring to light, among other things, the plot, the meaning of the story, how this story explains changes that have happened along the way, the characters and their roles.

One very important point raised by Cochran (1990) is that the use of narrative in career research might help address, and explore answers to, a number of fundamental questions concerning, for instance, the nature of a good life or of a good career, the meaning of life, and the differences in the way people make decisions. Cochran's insightful suggestions are without doubt worth considering.

Young and Collin (1988) throw into relief important aspects of narrative when, referring to Packer, they remark that from a hermeneutical point of view, individuals

are seen more as active and goal directed than as being conditioned by experiences of their past. In a perspective similar to Polkinghorne's (1990), they present hermeneutical inquiry as a process "in which the examination moves between the whole, the parts, and back again" (p. 155). Applying this research approach to several aspects of career, namely, career as a project, its intentionality and agency, its dynamic and active nature, and its social and cultural dimensions, Young and Collin suggest that narrative, for example, helps in the search for themes or patterns and reveals "the past-in-the-present" (p. 157), provides a tool for studying the goal directed nature of career behavior, and how the meaning that career takes for individuals is a shared meaning in the sense that it is closely related to the social interactions in which they are involved. In a subsequent article, Collin and Young (1988) examine three examples of studies in which investigators have used a hermeneutical or quasi-hermeneutical approach. Through their discussion of the procedures used, the results observed and the problems encountered by those researchers, Collin and Young illustrate, among other things, how hermeneutical inquiry can provide a way of relating wholes to parts or of clarifying the issue of the individual's agency. They also address several issues concerning the methodology of hermeneutical research.

In a later piece, the same authors (Collin & Young, 1992) propose that "it is through interpretation and subsequent construction of narratives and stories that individuals make sense of their career and world" (p. 2), and that consequently, the understanding and practice of interpretation are key elements in career research.

Narrative research can be instrumental in theory building, as illustrated in the study done by Pratt, Arnold, and Mackey (2001), who used the narratives provided by adolescents in 35 Canadian families to examine the representations these young people had of their parents' perspectives during critical incidents or turning points in their value development. They then related the material collected in the stories to a five-point index designed to measure the adolescents' representations of, and responsiveness to, the parental voices. It was observed, among other things, that differences in the adolescents' narratives were congruent with patterns of same-sex identification reported in the literature. The authors also found that the stories were consistent with quantitative data showing differences between fathers' and mothers' voices with regard to relational and vocational issues, the mothers being seen as knowledgeable on both, while the fathers' voices on relational issues were substantially weaker. On the whole, as Pratt et al. (2001) point out, narratives illustrating the construction of adolescents' experiences and of the role of their parents in these events contribute to theory construction, for they provide data which are likely to help researchers and theorists better understand the nature of the family context during the adolescent transition.

Atkinson (1998) states that in qualitative research with life story, theory emerges from the story- the whole story-, contrary to what happens in quantitative investigations, in which hypotheses emerging from a theoretical framework are tested. From another perspective, Atkinson suggests that story is essential "to learn what is unique to some and universal to others and how both are parts of a dynamic interacting whole" (p.74).

Narratives were among the research approaches used in studies conducted by Riverin-Simard, Spain, and Michaud (1997), who have specified the ontological,

epistemological, and methodological positions that they have adopted in their investigations of adult vocational development and aging, including women's career development. According to those authors, these positions are mainly related to the constructivist paradigm, in the sense that their research results have allowed them to construct and reconstruct their understanding of the phenomena that they studied.

As McAdams et al. (2001) remark, after a life transition, people may ask themselves how they made it, they may feel the need to organize events in a coherent narrative. McAdams and his colleagues suggest that in studying the narrations of people who have experienced life transitions, "we come to understand better the ways in which meanings of transitions are constructed"—and that—"it is these meanings that guide the person through the next phase of their existence, only (usually) to have the meanings change once again as life moves on" (p. xvi).

Finally, whereas traditional approaches to research have been conceived of in terms of a process in which an expert scientist controls the investigation being conducted with subjects, both the participant and the investigator are partners in the research process where a narrative methodology is being used (e.g., Larsen, 1999). As we shall see in the following section, the same holds true with regard to practice in which narrative has the central place.

## 7. Narrative and career practice

When I think about the use of narrative in counseling, a song composed by Luc Plamondon, another of our songwriters, comes to my mind. This song, which is entitled "Le blues du businessman" (The businessman's blues) (Plamondon, 1995, track 17), is about a very successful businessman who travels around the world, knows many people, makes a lot of money. He meets about all the criteria defining what it means to be socially successful in the world in which he lives. But he is not happy, and when asked about what he longs for, he answers that he would have liked to do something in which he could discover why he exists, in which he could express himself, in which he could *invent* his own life.

Counselors using narrative approaches in their interventions are facilitators of the meaning making process through which clients, like this businessman, are involved in trying, so to speak, to create, to invent their life in their particular contexts. Those counselors are thus co-creators of the stories that their clients tell about themselves, stories which have both fluid and more static aspects. It is not new, of course, to speak of the practice of counseling as both a science and an art, but it is perhaps more appropriate than ever to emphasize this latter aspect when considering the use of narrative in counseling, which requires creative approaches from the practitioners.

Such aspects are reflected, along with others, in the contributions of writers who are interested in the applications of the narrative perspective. Referring to their studies of women's vocational development and to the career counseling program that they have developed on the basis of these research efforts, Spain and Bédard

(2001), for instance, point out that when we help people to see their vocational future as the continuation of their life story, we help them put to use their potential in order to become the subjects of their experience, the creators of their identity, instead of feeling determined by external influences.

Francequin (1995) described various examples of the use of life stories in guidance. In a more recent publication (Francequin, 2002), she cites Sartre's often quoted sentence: "The important thing is not what society has done with us, but what we do with what it has done with us" (p. 161, my translation). Francequin expresses her belief that progress throughout life depends on the individual's creativity and conviction that things can be changed. Her experience in the use of narratives with various populations has taught her that such progress, which is stimulated by sharing one's narrative, results from the constant construction going on between the socio-cultural and affective spheres.

The benefits that can follow from writing life-story narratives are not only in terms of personal insights and moves forward, as is illustrated by the results of Mayo's (2001) study with a sample of college students registered in a life-span developmental psychology course. It was observed that the students who had been asked to write their life analysis concerning their past, present and future, compared to those of two control groups who had not received this assignment, had a better academic performance. As was also expected, they expressed very favorable attitudes toward this experience, saying that this assignment had been helpful with regard to their personal growth.

The concept of career project proposed by Cochran (1992) rests partly on the psychology of personal constructs developed by Kelly (1955). Besides including the performance of tasks, such a project requires, Cochran points out, working on a personal theme. The significance of this project depends on several characteristics, one of which being that "through engaging in a career project, a person constructs various compositions that are capable of integrating parts" (p. 192), this integration resulting in a narrative which can guide life toward the future. In helping a person to implement a career project, a counselor is thus co-authoring a life story.

Constructivist underpinnings are present in the narrative approach to practice later developed by Cochran (1997) and which no doubt represents a major contribution. It is not derived from theories of career development, but proposes a theory of career counseling as such, which integrates the principles of the well known trait-factor, matching approach of the individual's characteristics with occupational requirements, but focuses on *employment*, on "how a person can be cast as the main character in a career narrative that is meaningful, productive, and fulfilling" (p. ix).

Cochran (1997) brings to light important aspects of his approach, namely, that individuals have representations of their future in which they see themselves as *agents* (who make things happen) or as *patients* (to whom things happen) with respect to this future; that narratives are powerful means for making meaning; and that because of its future orientation, career counseling "must focus not only on an immediate decision and action, but also on a person's capacity for future decisions and actions, what has been termed *practical wisdom* and a *sense of agency*" (p. 31).

The ways to implement the narrative approach are then discussed, and Cochran (1997) goes into details in describing seven units of career counseling, the first three of them bearing on how to construct a career narrative (elaborating a career problem, composing a life history, founding a future narrative), three others related to the enactment or actualization of a narrative (constructing reality, changing a life structure, enacting a role), and the last one (crystallizing a decision) which aims at bridging the gap between construction and enaction [sic].

Like other authors, Cochran (1997) conceives the role of the counselor, in the career counseling approach that he has developed, as one of co-author in negotiating stories that must take into account both the individual's life and the ecological context. In connection with that, the importance of the articulation between the context and the individual in the implementation of a vocational project is illustrated in research reported by Peylet (1995) and Rochex (1995).

If each individual is the author of his or her experience, the narrative that gives form to that experience by revealing its continuity of meaning deserves consideration in psychotherapy, as Neimeyer (1995) suggests. Reaching into the past and projecting oneself into the future, in order to consolidate "a sense of oneself over time" (p. 241) and find new life directions, considering opposing elements and then synthesizing them to arrive at new self-constructions, are functions of narrative mentioned by Neimeyer which have obvious applications in the field of career.

The articulation of a client's life theme in career counseling was illustrated by Savickas (1995) in an article where he presented a constructivist, meaning-making counseling approach for helping undecided clients. In this constructivist perspective, it is not the phenomenon of indecision which is being considered, but rather the person with his or her subjective experience of indecision, seen as a search for meaning, as an effort to recognize his or her life theme. The help provided by the counselor to bring this life theme to light is likely to facilitate the person's decision and movement "into new constructions of experience" (p. 366). Savickas's five-step counseling model involves, essentially, the identification of the client's life theme through the stories he or she provides, the counselor's narration of this theme, the discussion of the meaning of the indecision with regard to the life theme, the identification of occupational possibilities congruent with this theme and, finally, the rehearsal of skills necessary to implement a choice.

Constructivism and narrative are key words in the model of training for career counselors developed by Peavy (1992) and his collaborators. Their work was still in progress when Peavy's article was published, but the reconceptualization of career counseling practice and training proposed by this model was an invitation to move from positivist stances to postmodern alternatives in the way we look at career theory and practice.

In the continuation of this work, Peavy (1998) has more recently proposed a constructivist approach to counseling in which two of the major concepts are the construction of meaning and the invention of solutions. In Peavy's view, counselor and client are involved as partners in the reality construction of their relationship during the counseling session. Through this relationship, they construct and deconstruct the problem presented by the client. The counselor's role is to use the stories

brought by the client and to work in a cooperative way with him or her in order to find solutions. In this cooperative enterprise, the client's mental constructions "are elicited and refined hermeneutically—through listening, critical examination, and negotiation" (p. 252).

The creative aspect of the role assumed by the counselor in the search for solutions is emphasized by the term "bricoleur", or do-it-yourself enthusiast, that Peavy (1998) associates with the counselor. But in the constructivist perspective that he advocates, the individual is nevertheless seen as the expert in his or her life.

The above examples are but a very small sample of what can be found in the literature. Moreover, the theoretical bases and applications of narrative continue to be the object of many publications outside the field of counseling (e.g., de Gaulejac & Levy, 2000; Orofiamma, Dominicé, & Lainé, 2000).

## 8. Conclusion and some perspectives

An impressive body of knowledge has already been accumulated regarding the conceptualization, research perspectives, and applications of the constructivist/narrative approach to career, and nothing seems to indicate that these efforts are coming to a halt. On the contrary, promising developments in each of these areas should be witnessed in the years to come, were it only because several areas of research and practice are worth exploring. For example, to what extent could such an approach be helpful with youngsters for whom the future, including their career future, is meaningless, who see themselves more as *patients* than as *agents*, to use Cochran's (1997) terms, and who may appear as procrastinators when the time comes to deal with the problem of their educational choices? Approaching this kind of problem from a constructivist/narrative perspective should prove rewarding. Or what could this approach contribute to career counseling with minority and underprivileged people for whom the meaning of career—if indeed career has a meaning—may be quite different from what it is for others, and cannot be understood without considering their cultural contexts? In connection with that, it is worth noting that, in effect, according to Peavy (1998), constructivist theory and First Nations' philosophy of life share many characteristics, in the sense, for instance, that both attach importance to cooperative and constructive relationships, and consider that each person is the expert in his or her own life.

As practitioners know quite well, the underlying motivations of many career choices are sometimes not easy to unravel with traditional counseling approaches and techniques. The meaning of such choices and the clients' constructions need to be brought to light, and the constructivist/narrative approach appears as a powerful means towards these ends.

Yet, the difficulties that face the researchers and practitioners using it should not be ignored. The validity issue concerning narrative research is one of those challenges. As a matter of fact, concerns, if not protests, have been voiced concerning the validity of qualitative approaches, like narrative, in research. Those interested in the use of narrative strategies have discussed this problem (e.g., Atkinson, 1998;

Josso, 2000a; Lapointe, 2000). Atkinson (1998), for one, recognizes the value laden aspect of life stories, the personal construction that they represent, and suggests that their trustworthiness may be more important than what we might call their validity. He points out, however, that it is important to consider their internal consistency. Although people may react differently, from time to time, to the inconsistencies that they face in their life, “their stories of what happened and what they did should be consistent within itself [sic]” (p. 60).

With respect to the objection that the use of narratives in research goes against the scientific law according to which generalizations cannot be made from the observation of a single case, Lapointe (2000) expresses his belief that everyone’s story can find an echo in another person, and that to some extent, similarities exist between all people. But Josso (2000a), taking a position similar to Peavy’s (1998), goes further in saying that what matters in narratives is not the authenticity of the narrated facts, but rather “the way each person looks at his or her life, the meaning that is attached to events seen as important, in short, the story that each one feels like telling to oneself” (p. 273, my translation), because “the stories are staging a life which was and is in the process of being invented from a reinterpretation of our more or less heterogeneous heritages” (pp. 273–274, my translation). These reflections are interesting, but the problem of defining and applying validity criteria in narrative research is still one that should mobilize the efforts of researchers for some time.

Other challenges lie before the researchers and practitioners interested in the use of constructivist methods. Some concern the skills required from those who are co-creating stories with subjects or clients. Still others are related to the ethical problems that are specific to these undertakings. Moreover, problems of a different sort have to do with the difficulty of using narrative with career counseling clients in work environments where pressures are being exerted on counselors in order that they use time-saving and more *efficient* approaches in their professional practice. But it can be expected, I believe, that creative efforts will be made and rewarded in meeting these challenges, and that career theory, research, and practice will continue to be enriched by the constructivist/narrative perspective.

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