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Creative writing for life design: reflexivity, metaphor and change processes through narrative

Introduction

In response to a rapidly changing, increasingly insecure and complex labor market, career counselors and researchers are developing methods that can meet the needs of individuals who would navigate this new terrain. In the last two or three decades, narrative career counseling practices (Cochran, 1997; McMahon & Watson, 2012; Reid & West, 2011; Savickas, 2012) have been developed to promote career adaptability (Savickas, 2011) and career resilience (Lyons, Schweitzer & Ng, 2015). Narrative counseling (i.e. career construction) is founded on the idea that in order to survive and thrive on the labor market of the 21st century, individuals must reflexively construct their identities in a process of meaning making, where identity is co-constructed in the form of a narrative: a story about who one is that provides both meaning and direction (Wijers & Meijers, 1996).

Perhaps the most well-known and elaborated narrative theory and approach is the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). The idea behind this theory is that individuals attribute meaning to their vocational behavior and that this meaning “is held in implicit themes that weave through explicit plots that compose the macronarrative about vocational identity” (Savickas, 2011a, p.26). The plot and life theme are often about something that feels as if it is missing in life; something that individuals need or for which they yearn. Indeed, the progress from need to goal has the potential to transform an

individual because, “career construction relies on the idea that people organize their lives around a problem that preoccupies them and a solution that occupies them” (o.c., p.32). In practice, career construction knows three parts, “during the first act clients construct their careers through short stories, during the second act practitioners reconstruct the small stories into a large story, and during the third act client and practitioner co-construct a revised identity narrative, new intentions, and possible actions” (o.c., p.43).

However, several things in Career Construction Theory behoove further examination. How for instance does the transformation of feelings into stories take place and how does that process unfold within the individual? What practitioners do is “try to help clients elaborate their statement of a career problem in feeling terms. Career construction practitioners follow the emotions, those feelings that signal to clients that something requires their attention and moves them to seek counseling. (...) Emotions provide the fulcrum for revising the self during counseling. Before meaning may be reorganized and action engaged, feelings must change” (o.c., p. 53). Although the theory explains how strong emotions often surface in the telling of early childhood recollections, it is not clear what elements in the process allow feelings to change and become new understandings.

Second, the role that the practitioner plays in the learning process of the client is not entirely clear. In transforming micro-narratives into the macro-narratives the task is “to transform scattered images and emotions into experience vignettes that reflect a clear and coherent theme that others could begin to understand” (o.c., p.68). In order to be able to do this, practitioners need to have a ‘poetic creativity’ based on intuition and empathy which is needed to embrace a story, allow space for negative sensations, get a sense of the story’s

mood, notice the pain and tolerate ambiguity (o.c., p.69). But, what is this poetic creativity exactly and in what way does this creativity interact with the learning process of the client?

The question that may lead to answers is to know what is happening within the client and to track the learning of the client in more precise detail. As the client is assisted by a practitioner to co-construct a new narrative – or as in this research, is facilitated in a process of career writing – what is happening as the two co-construct a new, more life-giving narrative? Another way of saying this is, what is happening in the inner journey of the client or student?

This inner journey that is embarked upon during career construction has been studied in part by Meijers and Lengelle (2012). In their examination of identity theories that are at the foundation of career learning, they have contributed two additional dimensions to narrative work in the field. First, they stress the importance of Gendlin's (1982) view that identity learning consists of the client's internal shift in experiencing as a result of accurately representing an internal sense. Therefore, they refer to Law (1996) who describes career construction as a learning process that goes through four stages: sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding. In the sensing stage thoughts and feelings are given room to be expressed in their full range without censoring or a need to interpret or understand – it might be called 'mapping' the territory. In the sifting stage several possible key themes are identified. It is a sorting out of what was mapped. In the focusing stage a key theme is identified that requires deepening and broadening. And in the understanding stage a clear insight is gained into the preoccupation or dilemma, whereby a struggle or question is reframed, accepted or made meaningful.

Second, Meijers & Lengelle (2012; see also Lengelle & Meijers, 2015) argue that the engine behind this learning process is dialogical in nature and depends upon an internal and external dialogue. While Career Construction Theory clearly shows the external dialogue and the facilitator's role in uncovering the internalized story, this emphasis on cultivating the internal dialogue and understanding its dynamics is an important addition.

The dynamics of the internal dialogue can be made visible with Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In this theory the Self is seen as “a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions” (Hermans, 2013, p.83), built from the repertoire of various spatial and temporal positions encountered as an individual lives his life within society. These may be internal positions with a distinctive inner voice and personal history (e.g. I as man, white, teacher), external positions i.e. an ‘other-in-the-self’ (e.g. the voices of my mother, my daughter) or outside positions (actual people or groups in the outside world) (Raggatt, 2012, p.31). Although the various positions are involved in relationships of relative dominance and social power, each position functions as a relatively autonomous author able to tell its own story from its unique spatial and temporal perspective. The self is constantly bombarded with new experiences, events and contacts, which spark decentering and centering movements in the process of positioning, repositioning and counter-positioning. New possible positions may be appropriated, leading to potential reorganization, negotiation, promotion, demotion, and integration into and within the existing I-position repertoire (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

From the perspective of Dialogical Self Theory, the internal dialogue can be described as

a conversation between various I-positions that has beneficial effects when the initial conversation is broadened and deepened (e.g. more I-positions than normal begin to participate in the conversation; positions marginalized are given voice) and results in the development of meta- and promoter positions (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2013). When two or more positions act in service to each other meta-positions develop. On the basis of meta-positions promoter positions can emerge, which represent an individual's ability to become action-able (Ligorio, 2011). That said, the expression of I-positions, and the way in which they lead to expanded I-positions and ultimately to meta- and promoter positions has not been examined in detail. The questions that follow are: how and under which conditions do new I-positions get expressed and expand and what are the bridges between the positions that lead to meta- and promoter positions?

Our hypothesis is that metaphors play a crucial role in the development of I-, meta- and promoter positions because they form a bridge from emotions to new understandings. They do so because metaphors (1) resonate with the emotional brain (Ricoeur, 1978), (2) are specific and clear enough to be put into words (Maasen & Weingart, 1995) and (3) are fuzzy enough to leave room for expansions and interpretations (Jaszczolt, 2002). Metaphors make communication and interaction possible between I-positions (i.e. giving voice to life experiences in an internal dialogue) and with others (an external dialogue) by providing a 'common ground' for making sense of communicated images, concepts and emotions and thus facilitating the creation of new ways of making meaning (Barner, 2011). They allow the transfer of coherent chunks of perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential characteristics – in other words, from a vehicle that is known, to a topic that is less so (Hofstadter, 2001). "Metaphors can express in a succinct manner that which is

implicit but is unable to be expressed in discrete, literal language” according to Ortony (1975, p.50). The metaphor offers that which is ‘fuzzy’ – the often half conscious images, thoughts and feelings that together form an I-position – with a clear label and thus functions as a ‘messenger of meaning’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

In describing what we propose is taking place, we might say that metaphors create tangible starting points for exploration, can be used to expand to build bridges between I- positions, and some metaphors run as coherent and repeating threads throughout the learning process helping to shape a client’s current story and the one they are moving towards. In this article we explore the above hypothesis, using the Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) interview method (Larsen, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008). This method is applied to examine in detail the ‘inner journey’ taken by two people who took part in a two-day career-writing course.

The intervention

As the career writing intervention has been described in detail elsewhere (Lengelle, 2014) we will only describe it briefly here. During the two-day course a group of 10-15 participants meet face-to-face in a classroom setting where a facilitator leads them through a variety of writing exercises and theory about identity/meaning-oriented learning. Participants spend about 80% of the time writing, sharing their writing by reading parts of it aloud, and 20% of the time the facilitator explains the exercises and movement between a ‘first-story’ (i.e. outdated, coping, default narrative that is no longer serving) and ‘second story’ (i.e. new understandings about identity). Participants write

according to the proprioceptive method at the beginning of each day (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002), they write poems based on existing poem prompts, they try their hand at fiction, reply to sentence stems like, “As I child I couldn’t stand...” and they write dialogues (both fictional and not between different aspects of themselves). The closing exercise is focused on bringing together some of their insights in the form of a Haiku or archetypal reflection and in this particular case in the form of ‘advice to others’ (which after the writing is read aloud and talked about as a form of advice to self). In summary, a variety of exercises is used to help students to first express and explore their career and life preoccupations and slowly work towards a retelling of their experience in the form of a life-giving “second story” (for a full overview, see Lengelle & Meijers, 2014).

Method

Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) is aimed at obtaining “clients reports of their subjective experiences” (Watson & Rennie, 1994, p.500). Ordinarily the IPR interview is done by using a recorded session between a counselor and client, which is later reviewed by the client and a researcher whereby the client is asked to remark on what he/she thought or felt during a particular moment in the intervention. A core feature of the IPR process is looking back at the moment of the interaction with questions like, “what did you feel at *that* moment” – clients are encouraged to express their inner cognitive, affective and somatic experiences and processes (Larson, Flesaker, & Stege, 2008).

The IPR process normally uses “video-assisted recall to access conscious yet unspoken experiences” (o.c., p.18) and asks the client or student what they were thinking or feeling

during the session (or intervention) in order to closely observe the moment of interaction. The aim is having those participating “become more sensitive to and explicit about their internal processes during human interactions” (o.c., p.20). For this research, instead of a recorded 50-60 minute counseling session, followed by an IPR conversation within 48 hours, we used IPR on writing done in the course within 48 hours of the 2-day career-writing course. Instead of watching a video together and stopping it at various points to ask about thoughts and feelings occurring during the session, the written work was read aloud by both the participant and/or the researcher whereby the latter asked about the thoughts and feelings that had occurred during the writing of those words/sentences.

For the IPR process, we made use of the student’s first and last written assignment. The first assignment was a 20-minute “proprioceptive write” (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002) – the method has students write on unlined paper listening to baroque music, while being instructed to “write what you hear”, “listen to what you write” and “ask the proprioceptive question” (p. 32-24) which is “what do I mean by...(fill in word or phrase that can then be unpacked further)...?” The last exercise was one in which participants were asked to write the best advice they had to offer others with inspiration from various lines from a poetic card that plays with words and turns clichés or known phrases into original thoughts (e.g. “The public wants summersaults, I’d settle for balance”) (Boschman & Arik, 2013).

Participants

Lisa works in administration at a university. Previously she was a social worker and organized events and work placements. She is in her late forties and the mother of two teenage daughters about whom she speaks in her IPR interview. She took the career-

writing course because she wanted to explore if more challenge, excitement, and balance were possible in her work – and also to explore the questions, “is this the right spot for me or how can I make it the right spot”. She had mixed feelings about her current position, finding it both rewarding, but too busy and sometimes not enjoyable enough.

Nadia is in career transition having left her job as a university instructor and researcher. She completed her PhD while raising a young family and felt she needed to time spend on personal healing and determining what work and work environment would be more or most suitable. She is in her late thirties and the mother of three; she also spoke about her children during the interview. The themes she spoke of were less directly career related, however she tied her reflections on life themes directly to her explorations into future career aspirations.

The participants’ names have been changed for this article. The research received the appropriate ethics clearance and informed consent was confirmed. Participants received a draft of the article and in a follow-up conversation, this draft was discussed and any changes the participants suggested were made.

Results

The results of the interviews are ordered based on Law’s description of the four phases of the career-learning process (sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding) and Hermans & Hermans-Konopka’s (2010) and Meijers & Lengelle’s (2012) description of a beneficial internal dialogue (broadening of I-positions and the following development of meta- and promoter positions).

Case study 1 - Lisa's story: To fly or not to fly

Lisa began her IPR conversation reading the first lines from her proprioceptive writing where she was asked to recall what she was thinking or feeling at the time of that writing. She recalled music she had listened to on the way to the workshop that reminded her of a recent film she saw that had made an impression on her. So, when asked what she thought and felt starting her 'write' she told the story of the film (*La Famille Bélier*). It was about a daughter of deaf parents; the girl can hear and sing and has big dreams; she wants to go off and study in Paris. It's about the song she sings in which, with words and sign language, she manages to communicate her dream to her parents who then understood her message and wish her well. The song is about flying – spreading one's wings. The first metaphor she uses is "je vole" (I fly, in French) and this acts as the core metaphor throughout the IPR conversation. Not only does it repeat in the writing, but also as a thread during the IPR session, where she elaborates on it and applies it to her own work situation, what she wants for her daughters, and then noting that the theme of "being free" (e.g. to be me; to ask from changes at work; to stay in and go out of one's comfort zone) and spreading one's wings to fly is key to her. The metaphor as centralizing concept is clearly one that resonates and plays a role at various steps in the process.

As alluded to above, career narrative that becomes a life-giving story is a way in which preoccupations are the impetus for gaining new insights and setting transformative goals. In the chart below the stages are shown in Lisa's process and the metaphoric links between I-positions are discussed below. These are summaries of what was said and have

been formulated by the researchers. The tables can be read horizontally, beginning with the learning stages. The table shows three different, but parallel developments. For instance, in the “focusing” stage the life theme is emerging and being looked at more closely. Similarly, the “meta-position” is a stage representing new insights and the possibility of new combinations of parts of the self. The metaphor accompanying the “focusing” and “meta-position” stage is shown directly below in that vertical column. Although the learning stages by Law (1996) and the dialogical steps by Hermans (2010) are not synonymous and each represent a different way of charting and describing the development process, they do both refer to a later reflexive stage – that is, the individual has gained and is beginning to articulate life themes.

*** somewhere here figure 1 ***

The metaphors Lisa used and the different tasks they seemed to play:

1. “flying” forms a kind of overarching theme that continues to appear throughout all the stages – as if to return to, elaborate on and that forms a thread of continuity.
2. “knot, clench, not allowing myself that” sheds light on what is missing and later in the work “am I in the right spot here” is a way of returning to the reason she’s attending the workshop – a kind of questioning before really going for the meta and promoter position. The knot, clench metaphors seem to help her articulate I-positions and expanded I-positions as if to say “this is important to me and I know this because when I’m not there I feel a knot, clench, that I’m not allowing myself to have it”.

3. “space, room, energy” are smaller metaphors that seem to nudge her forward in articulating what *is* life giving (here metaphors help to articulate what is important on a pre-meta level – as if to say, this is what I need to thrive).
4. my ability to see “shades of grey (not just black and white)” and “taking myself as I am so I can rest easy” are part of the ‘action’ plan and function as both meta and promoter position, linking both (i.e. I’m good at seeing shades of grey and should make use of that ability).
5. comparing metaphors and discarding metaphors for more precise ones plays a role in fine articulation, for instance, as she’s developing a meta-position, “I’m a ball being tossed here and there, actually no, it’s about me steering the boat” and “I can do this by using my skill of seeing shades of grey...”.
6. working with a “given metaphor” close to the end of the workshop to formulate advice to others (i.e. one the workshop facilitator provides through a card prompt) brought up the promoter position “accepting self as I am”.
7. crystallizing metaphor as advice to self, “searching for shades of grey; taking care of that; shades of grey give me space” and finally “shades of grey let me fly”.

Case study 2 – Nadia’s story: Connected to myself, I am connected to others, the world, and life

Nadia began her IPR also reading from her proprioceptive writing, which was, as mentioned before, done as the first exercise at the beginning of day one of the course. She

immediately noted a sense of tension, in particular at seeing all the others writing away and wondering if she could do that too. First she noted a kind of blame at not being given a more clear ‘starting point’ for writing but also realized that this was a way of ‘externalizing’ the issue (looking for a cause outside herself). She then noted a feeling of physical relaxation as she accepted the feelings that arose. She made contact with her body, putting her feet on the floor as instructed by the facilitator and looking around the room and eventually saying to herself “it’s okay”. She called this a ‘self correction’ and she was then able to go inside, to her feelings, (“turn my thinking off”) and write. Her story was one where the repeating theme was “connecting with myself” and recognizing a pattern of trying to fulfill perceived expectations of others and on the other hand learning to listen in, connect with her own “heart” and “energy source” and experience herself as connected to others, the world, and life. Listening to the ‘creature’ in herself, noting her old pattern of identification with “social structures” and “felt roles” and articulating the solution in the form of “stop, and then go inside” were key features in her narrative.

The metaphors Nadia used and the different tasks they seemed to play are shown in figure 2.

*** somewhere here figure 2 ***

Nadia’s metaphor seemed to describe each stage of her learning clearly and her meta-position (self insights) often coincided directly with an image. Her metaphoric pattern was not like Lisa’s in that it was – to use a metaphor – more of a pointillist painting,

where a series of metaphors were used to each show part of the larger painting, which as a whole seemed to communicate one key piece of advice to herself: connect with yourself through your body and that is how you find yourself connected to others, the world and life.

There were metaphors that showed issues, “barriers” and “not listening” and “adjusting to others expectations”, metaphors that described self insight “I see my pattern” and “the old reflex” and “listening to the creature inside myself”, and finally metaphors that described the solutions (or advice to self), “welcome it all” with “open arms” “notice when you fall into the old pattern” and “know it’s a process” and “listen” to oneself.

Discussion

In looking carefully at the learning process facilitated by career writing using IPR and by examining closely the process in which the participants engaged, there are several key things we noticed. First, that metaphors indeed act as the bridge between emotions that signaled possible salient explorations and cognitions expressed in new understandings. Second, the movement between I-positions towards meta- and promoter positions were nudged along by metaphors and often those meta- and promoter positions were expressed in the form of a kind of crystallizing or solution-based metaphor. It is important to know that there seemed to be several ‘types’ of metaphors and each played a different role in bridging emotions and cognitions.

The thread metaphor: a metaphor that appeared early on and was expanded and revisited throughout the IPR conversation. It appeared in the proprioceptive write several times and was easily revisited, expanded and used to examine one's thinking. In Lisa's piece, the thread metaphor was "flying" which was used in a host of different ways, beginning with the story of the movie she'd seen that inspired her, exploring her role as a mother to daughters, in particular in relation to a daughter who seemed to limit herself in broadening horizons, and finally in the question "do I allow myself to fly" and "am I flying" and "how can I fly in this job"? In Nadia's story, the metaphor of the "pattern" was the thread throughout her writing and IPR conversation – the pattern of first responding with the motivation to please others or respond to imagined expectations and being "the Ping-Pong ball" and now, more and more often, going within to reconnect with herself in the form of "self-correction".

Nudging metaphors were a variety of smaller metaphors that seemed to help participants explore the territory and move forward incrementally. For instance, a metaphor like "keeping all balls in the air" helped Lisa articulate the busyness at work and eventually the meta-position, that it wasn't necessarily the type of work that kept her from flying, but that the lack of "space" was what kept her from being able to "build" "gain energy" and "catch her breath". In Nadia's case, the nudging metaphors all pointed to the main theme and conclusion, "being thrown back on myself" and then "turning thinking off" and "listening to the creature" and "getting into my feelings". In her case, it was as if each nudging metaphor kept showing her both the old pattern and the new opportunity, which simultaneously illuminated the fear of appearing full of herself or being too self

focused to finding that connection to self was paradoxically the key to real connection with others.

The crystallizing metaphor (solution-articulating metaphor): at the end of the course and in exploring ‘advice to others’ (the final writing exercise) a meta-position frequently emerges that represents a personal insight and advice to self, much like one’s motto in Life Design (Savickas, 2004). In Lisa’s case, it was the talk of “not thinking in terms of black and white, but shades of grey”. She repeated this several times and eventually defined its meaning as “needing to be flexible” and “finding creative solutions for problems”. This metaphor also led to the expression of the promoter position when she articulated having talked with her boss at work but that she would have to revisit some of the items that were important to her at their next meeting. In Nadia’s case, the crystallizing metaphor was “connection with myself is foundational” and this was further supported by smaller affirming metaphors, like “open arms” and “open the door” and “embracing what you encounter” and a key realization that “it’s a process” where she could adjust on the scale to create “balance”.

The progression within the career construction process with career writing as an intervention is characterized by emotions signaling salient themes, and metaphors allowing what is salient to be explored, given meaning, and resulting in new insights (meta-positions) and steps towards action (promoter position). This is a valuable observation as one of the common pitfalls in counseling conversations in schools is that school teachers in charge of career’s guidance tend to skip over emotions (Winters et al.,

2012). It seems that those responsible for career guidance in schools are often afraid of dealing with feelings (and report “not being trained to do so”), which might explain the persistence of seemingly pragmatic, but instrumental approaches being used when research shows they are insufficient. If those facilitating career-learning processes were fully aware that emotions are indeed the fulcrum of identity development and that ‘poetic creativity’ is required of them they might feel ill equipped to work with narrative approaches. However, if they knew that a client or student, if stimulated to write in a variety of structured ways, *will* find his or her own metaphors and in this way begin to access personal wisdom, this fear might be tempered and the terrain embarked upon.

We note that in this article we have presented and explored only two case studies and that is not enough on which to base generalizable conclusions. We also worked with two women with considerable life experience and a willingness to engage in personal development. We do believe, however from extensive experience in teaching writing for personal development and providing training in fostering meaningful career conversations that the process from a first to second story (i.e. from struggle, emotions, and new understandings) is not age- or gender dependent and follows a similar pattern. In all cases personal and career challenges must be transformed step by step into a meaningful ‘second story’, which constitutes a form of identity development (Meijers & Lengelle, 2015).

Conclusion

To use yet another metaphor, this research has given us a look into the *inside journey* of participants of career writing, one narrative approach within career-learning work. By reflecting on fresh writing samples, using the IPR method, we have identified several key types of metaphors used that are elemental in change processes: the thread, the nudging, and the crystallizing (or solution-based) metaphor. Interestingly while metaphors are offered by counselors in some approaches (Amundson, 2010), and others are elicited, for instance, name “Three Role Models” or childhood hero in Life Design (Savickas, 2004), career writing allows for the emergence of a participant’s own metaphors. This is perhaps one reason why writing is a valuable narrative method approach. Additionally, writing allows first for the privacy (i.e. safety) of expressing feelings and lends itself to transforming feelings into figurative language. The literary articulation of what is felt and experienced in the form of proprioceptive writing, fiction, poetry, advice to self invites individuals to move towards the language that best articulates their woes, struggles, sadness, and confusion. And metaphors are key elements of change – the oil that lubricates the growth process, the bridge between struggle, feelings, and new understandings – the tangible ingredients for feeling and articulating new stories of identity.

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