Career Assessment

Qualitative Approaches

Mary McMahon and Mark Watson (Eds.)

Career Assessment: Qualitative Approaches

CAREER DEVELOPMENT SERIES
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Scope
Recent developments in the literature on career have begun to reflect a greater global reach and acknowledgement of an international/ global understanding of career. These developments have demanded a more inclusive understanding of career as it is experienced by individuals around the world. Related issues within the career literature include the relationships within the career theory literature, or theory integration and convergence, and between theory and practice. The influence of constructivism is another influence which is receiving sustained attention within the field.

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Career Assessment

Qualitative Approaches

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Printed on acid-free paper

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

WENDY PATTON

FOREWORD

This is a landmark book in the career literature as it is the first text to focus on qualitative career assessment. The editors have assembled a high calibre group of international authors, many of whom have been original developers of the unique compilation of qualitative career instruments and perspectives included in this book. It tracks the philosophical, theoretical and contextual perspectives on career assessment, and explores in depth its history, a history which has seen career assessment dominated by quantitative career assessment. Ironically, closer reading of some very early works, for example Parsons (1909), has highlighted the very early presence of qualitative assessment principles. However with the increasing acknowledgement that quantitative career assessment no longer adequately meets the increasing diversity of contexts in which career assessment needs to occur, it is timely to provide an emphasis on the emergence of qualitative career assessment to better accommodate the increasing complexities, and subjectivity, of individual career development in the twenty-first century. This point is emphasised by many of the book's authors, and is especially noted in the final reflection by Hazel Reid.

However, importantly, the book does not present the qualitative assessment approach uncritically. It focuses on key issues which the field needs to address to develop a more dominant place in the field. Of considerable importance is the need to develop an evidence base, emphasised by Stead and Davis' chapter. The book notes the importance of qualitative career assessment forging a place within the career assessment theoretical and practical literature, becoming a part of a practitioner's arsenal in engaging with clients, and developing processes which are inclusive of and sensitive to cultural contexts. Connected with this development of qualitative assessment in the field is the attendant need for practitioner training to include a focus on this approach – "qualitative career assessment needs to be seen for what it is, that is a legitimate way of engaging in the career assessment of clients and thus requiring, as with quantitative career assessment, that career practitioners be adequately prepared to use it" (McMahon & Watson, Chapter 29). What is also unique in this book is the exploration of qualitative career assessment within the lens of career development learning. In an innovative approach, the editors have introduced learning as a framework through which Part 2 of the book is structured.

Part 1 of the book provides key theoretical and philosophical foundations to qualitative assessment, highlights evidentiary support, and provides practical guidelines for integrating qualitative assessment into career counselling. It emphasises the strong base which already exists for qualitative career assessment.

Part 2 of the book provides the reader with a variety of qualitative career assessment tools, as Reid notes "a wealth of examples of 'how to do' qualitative assessment" (Chapter 30). There is increasingly a wide diversity of qualitative career assessment processes emerging in the literature and this book provides the reader with the opportunity to explore what is presently available. In many cases, the original authors of the assessment process have contributed to the chapter (for example, Amundson, Law, McIlveen, McMahon, Patton and Watson, and Parker and Arthur). A unique and very helpful feature of the editors' structure of this part is the substructure which assists readers to identify qualitative assessments and processes which feature different learning styles – visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Each chapter is designed to assist the reader to reflect how each tool can be integrated into the career counselling process based on narrative and constructivist principles.

Part 3 of the book presents a series of chapters which challenge the binary quantitative/qualitative perspective when it comes to assessment and career counselling, demonstrating recent work which demonstrates the complementarity that is possible by seamlessly integrating, as suggested by Whiston and Rahardha (2005), these two seemingly different traditions. Again, the importance of Parsons' (1909) early work on holistic career assessment and counselling is evident. This part includes work by Sampson and his colleagues, emphasising theory based approaches to integrating qualitative and quantitative assessment, and the recent work by McMahon and Watson in developing the Integrated Structured Interview (ISI) process.

Part 4 of this book challenges practitioners to ensure assessment and counselling approaches are appropriate for a full range of diverse contexts. The book editors emphasise the potential of qualitative career assessment processes to be inclusive of, and sensitive to, cultural contexts. Chapters in this part focus on disability, vulnerable individuals, and non-Western cultural contexts.

Finally, Part 5 of the book proposes future challenges for the incorporation of qualitative career assessment into the career counselling theoretical, empirical and practical literature. Noting again the limited consistent attention to qualitative assessment in the literature to date, the editors emphasise the need for a systemic evidence base for the effectiveness of these processes. In 2006, Reid commented that part of the dilemma in acceptance of qualitative assessment is that practitioners are unsure about "how we do it". McMahon and Watson take this question to a new level, noting that the future of qualitative career assessment will only be strengthened if there is a strong evidence base documenting "how we know that what we do works" (Chapter 29).

This book of 30 chapters combines helpful descriptions of a broad range of qualitative assessment processes (18 in all) and 4 chapters providing suggestions for work in diverse contexts. However as mentioned, further than provide this description, the book provides a comprehensive discussion of the position of qualitative assessment within the literature, and an important challenge from the book's editors:

In presenting this first book on qualitative career assessment, it is hoped that readers will gain more coherent and comprehensive perspectives that guide future assessment practice and research and in doing so, strengthen qualitative career assessment's position in the broader field of career counselling. (Chapter 29).

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PREFACE

The title of this book, *Career assessment: Qualitative approaches*, was intentionally chosen by the co-editors to acknowledge career assessment's longstanding integral role in career counselling.

An aim of this book, as the first compilation on qualitative career assessment, has been to move it away from fragmented depictions as practical activities and techniques that might be used to engage and interest clients. Rather, it has been our intention in editing this book to raise the profile of qualitative career assessment as a form of assessment in its own right and not as an accessory to quantitative assessment or to career counselling. In presenting a coherent body of work on qualitative career assessment, the book demonstrates that it has historical, philosophical, theoretical, and research foundations that ground and unite this form of assessment.

The book is innovative in taking a learning perspective of qualitative career assessment. Learning has featured in the field of career development for over half a century, primarily in some career theories, but it has seldom been integrated with career assessment. Indeed, career development learning may be regarded as a goal of the self-understanding and career exploration that is made possible through qualitative career assessment.

In compiling this body of work, we have also not wanted to shy away from important challenges facing qualitative career assessment in the future. Thus, challenges related to its emerging research base, its complementarity with quantitative career assessment, and its use in diverse contexts have been acknowledged and considered.

The book is structured in five parts. Part 1, *Qualitative career assessment: Foundations*, overviews the historical, philosophical, theoretical, and research foundations of qualitative career assessment. In addition, learning is introduced as a framework through which to consider qualitative approaches to career assessment. Part 2, *Qualitative career assessment: Instruments*, collates chapters on a comprehensive range of qualitative career assessment instruments. Moreover, this section is structured according to learning styles evident in the instruments described, specifically, visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic. Part 3, *Qualitative career assessment: Using Quantitative Career Assessment Qualitatively*, considers the qualitative use of quantitative career assessment, and in doing so the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative career assessment. Part 4, *Diverse Contexts*, considers qualitative approaches to career assessment in contexts other than able, western, middle class settings. Part 5, *Qualitative Career Assessment: Future Directions*, reflects on the chapters and considers suggestions for future directions.

In its focus on qualitative career assessment, this book will assume a unique and important position as the only such text to date and will therefore be seminal in the field of career assessment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PART 1

QUALITATIVE CAREER ASSESSMENT: FOUNDATIONS

Part 1 of this book, *Qualitative career assessment: Foundations*, describes the 'big picture' of qualitative career assessment by overviewing and locating it more broadly within the field of career assessment. The six chapters in this part of the book offer a response to criticism that qualitative career assessment is no more than techniques by establishing the historical origins, and the philosophical, theoretical, and research foundations of qualitative approaches to career assessment. Further, it also considers qualitative career assessment as a part of the process of both learning and of career counselling. In an innovation to the field, learning is introduced as a framework through which to view qualitative career assessment and as an organising structure for the chapters on qualitative career assessment instruments contained in Part 2.

MARK WATSON AND MARY MCMAHON

1. AN INTRODUCTION TO CAREER ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

There is a history to career assessment spanning over a century that is generally recognised as commencing with the foundational writing of Frank Parsons (1909) at the beginning of the last century. The present chapter explores how career assessment has evolved in both its quantitative and qualitative forms within career theory and career counselling. Given the focus of this book on qualitative career assessment, it seems apposite to understand the development of career assessment as a story, indeed a multi-story that provides a narrative of how the goals of career assessment have changed over time. The chapter explores several recursive influences on career assessment, such as changes in the philosophical underpinnings of career theory and career counselling as well as contextual changes in the world of work over successive decades. Finally, the future of career assessment is considered, particularly in relation to quantitative and qualitative career assessment, and the need for career practitioners to develop a guide in their selection and use of career assessment.

PHILOSOPHICAL STORIES OF CAREER ASSESSMENT

McMahon and Watson (2007) provide a systemic analysis of career research in its application to the modern and postmodern eras. In the present authors' opinion, this framework is equally applicable when considering the philosophies underpinning career assessment for over a century. McMahon and Watson describe the successive shift in emphasis over successive decades from a modern to a postmodern understanding of career development. The modernist philosophy adopts a logical-positivist perspective and consequently suggests that career development can be quantitatively measured because it is observable and thus the goal of career assessment should be predictive. This more scientific understanding of career behaviour and its assessment has led for several decades to an emphasis on the individual as the focus of career assessment. In a modernist philosophy of career development, the contexts within which individuals develop and within which they must make career choices are harder to consider in terms of measurement and certainly represent more unpredictable variables. The traditional and quantitative approach to career assessment promotes the scientific principles of universality and generalisability, thus creating what Savickas (1993) termed the "grand narrative" (p. 211).

In more recent times career psychology has mirrored the philosophical shift in the broader discipline of psychology from modernism to postmodernism. This has been reflected within career assessment in an increasing de-emphasis on objectivity and the scientific rigour of test scores to a greater emphasis on subjectivity and the consideration of individuals' perspectives and the contexts in which their careers develop (Savickas, 2000; Watson & McMahon, 2004). McMahon and Watson (2007) argue that, as a consequence, there has been a resultant shift from a grand, scientific narrative towards a local narrative, a more qualitative approach in which "stories in context told by the participant is emphasised" (p. 171). In terms of career assessment, Savickas (1993) described this shift as a move from psychometry and scores to narrative approaches and stories.

The shift in the philosophical underpinnings of career assessment has been well documented; so too has the recognition that, despite this shift, the modernist philosophy still remains the dominant story in career assessment. The predominant tradition of psychometric assessment continues to reinforce the perspective that career assessment needs to be scientific, resulting in much value being placed on reliable, valid and normed interpretations of career development. Such psychometric constructs are the antithesis of a postmodern perspective of career assessment, making it more difficult from the latter perspective to establish the validity and reliability of narrative and constructivist approaches to career assessment. Several authors (e.g., McMahon & Watson, 2007) have pointed out however, that one cannot compare the criteria for career assessment based on a modernist perspective with career assessment based on a postmodern perspective. Further, McMahon and Watson note that the modernist perspective of career development has had the advantage of decades to establish itself and, indeed, to become a foundational perspective in the training of career practitioners. On reflection, one wonders whether this is strictly true for both quantitative and qualitative career assessment were explicitly suggested in Parsons' (1909) seminal book, *Choosing a career*. Perhaps it is more the case that qualitative, postmodern forms of career assessment have lost time over the last century to establish their identity given the predominant and persistent identity of quantitative, modernist career assessment (McMahon, 2008; McMahon & Patton, 2006).

THEORETICAL STORIES OF CAREER ASSESSMENT

The predominant influence of quantitative forms of career assessment can be understood, in part, from an understanding of the story of career theory development. Borow's (1982) critique over thirty years ago of what he termed instrumental outcomes of career guidance is a good starting point in this regard. Borow suggests that we consider the history of career assessment in relation to the history of psychological assessment, that there is a recursive relationship between the two fields of assessment. Importantly, Borow makes the point that the early foundations of what was termed vocational guidance were atheoretical: "The guidance of that era did not indulge itself in the luxury of theory" (p. 18). A consequence of this

lack of theory was that vocational guidance relied on the principles and assessment methods of psychology and, in particular, differential psychology with its focus on individual differences and trait measurement. This limited theoretical conceptual foundation for career assessment led Borow to critique the further development of career assessment as being "conceptually anemic and basically atheoretical" (p. 19).

In the first half of the last century the story of career theory development was largely the story of trait-factor theory development. Osborn and Zunker (2006) describe how trait-factor theory "drastically modified over the years" (p. 2) as this modernist perspective of career development increased the scope of individual characteristics and traits that could be assessed. Indeed, even within a modernistic theoretical perspective multiple stories of individual measurable traits proliferated. As career theory increasingly considered a more holistic interpretation of individual career development as well as increasingly diverse and complex definitions of work, so the number of quantitative career measures increased. In addition, however, a broader postmodern theory base emerged which called for career assessment to consider the context within which individual career development occurs and, indeed, a contextual interpretation of established quantitative assessment. Thus, the theoretical recognition of the increasing complexity of career development influences has resulted in the emergence of more qualitative, narrative forms of career assessment. As we will see in the subsection on complementary stories of career assessment, more recent theoretical developments return us full cycle to Parsons' (1909) original suggestions of the co-existence of quantitative and qualitative career assessment.

The history of career assessment development and its practical application is embedded in career theory development and, more specifically, the importance that various career theories have attached to assessment. Thus, the theoretical perspective that career practitioners adopt can largely define their philosophy of the role and significance of career assessment. Sharf (2013) offers a useful synopsis of the interrelatedness of career theory and career assessment in which he describes the extent to which career assessment has played a dominant role in the development and application of career theory. Certainly, trait-factor theory and its contemporary derivatives have made career assessment a central tenet of their theory. Indeed, Sharf argues that the success of these theories depends on their accuracy in measuring a variety of traits such as aptitudes, interests, values and personality. The embeddedness of assessment within the theoretical perspective of trait-factor theories is nowhere more evident than in Holland's (1997) person-environment fit theory where the development of career assessment such as Holland's Self-Directed Search has been in tandem with the development of his theory.

The emergence of life-span, life-space career theory (Super, 1990) introduced a different role for career assessment, that of "identifying important developmental issues that individuals must face" (Sharf, 2013, p. 462). Super (1957) in his seminal book, *The psychology of careers*, warned over half a century ago that "there is still a widespread tendency to think of vocational counseling as the giving and interpretation of tests with some reference to personal and occupational data" (p. 305). This call for a broader conceptualisation of career development has moved career assessment

away from its more precise, modernist roots towards the less predictable and more postmodern concept of developmental tasks within the developmental stages that an individual progresses through. Further challenges to more conventional, quantitative assessments of career development have arisen in recent decades with the emergence of constructivist and narrative career theories. These focus intentionally on the more subjective perspective of career development, with the emphasis on individuals' perceptions of their career development. This latest movement in career theory would place far less emphasis on quantitative career assessment with its definitional prescriptions of scores; rather these theories would encourage personal definitions of career development that call for qualitative career assessment.

CONTEXTUAL STORIES OF CAREER ASSESSMENT

The previous two sections on philosophical and theoretical stories of career assessment have both emphasised the impact of the influence of context in the history of career assessment. One way to understand why quantitative career assessment has dominated the development of career assessment for so long is to consider the prevailing contexts within and for which such assessment was developed. For a considerable time during the last century, and particularly in the first half of that century, modernist career theories and the resultant quantitative definition of career assessment that they promoted made sense. The world of work provided, for instance, a more stable and predictable context within which to understand career development. Borow's (1982) critique of earlier career theory and its instrumentation describes the philosophy of those times as one of "uncompromising pragmatism" (p. 18), a period of time in which working conditions seemed to not call for theoretical development. Career assessment in the first half of the last century needed to address not only a relatively stable and hierarchical work environment, it also focused on a more limited definition of the working population. The latter was largely westernised, predominantly Caucasian, and definitely more privileged.

Contexts change and evolve and career assessment needs to respond to such changing realities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the personal career development of the recognised founder of career psychology, Frank Parsons. In the short life span of 53 years, Parsons changed career direction several times, with some of the changes being more radical than others but all of them reflecting on changing contexts within his life. From being educated as a civil engineer, Parsons successively became a labourer, a teacher, a lawyer, a lecturer, a social commentator and reformer, and an author of 12 books and 125 articles. Thus as working conditions became more fluid over the last century, and as the working population became increasingly diverse both in terms of culture and gender, there has been a sustained pressure for a pragmatic re-assessment of the nature of career assessment. McMahon and Watson (2007) make the important point that a modernist perspective and career theories grounded on such a philosophy have become "less congruent for the present time" (p. 177). A postmodern perspective would recognise that the world of work is in constant change and that there are a wide

variety of complex interacting variables that impact on individual career development. For instance, for several decades now there has been an increasing recognition both in career theory and research that individuals need to develop their careers within complex changing social, environmental, familial and, indeed, global contexts. All this calls for a less singular story, a less psychometric definition for career assessment and suggests that a multistoried approach is called for.

The limitations of a quantitative definition of career assessment in the evolving contexts within which career development takes place have become a persistent concern in more recent times. Lamprecht (2002), for instance, argues that the interpretation of quantitative career assessment remains largely decontextualised. This is mainly due to the fact that quantitative career measures are used more as a static, point-in-time intervention in the career counselling process. As such they essentially provide us with a psychometric definition, a singular story that means little without being contextually embedded within the contexts of a client's career development. A qualitative interpretation of quantitative assessment would address Savickas' (1993) call for career assessment to move from scores to stories. It is this increasing need for a more holistic understanding of career development and career assessment that has led to attempts to go beyond assessment scores towards stories within which such scores could be contextually understood. This movement is discussed in the next subsection of this chapter.

COMPLEMENTARY STORIES OF CAREER ASSESSMENT

McMahon and Patton (2006) describe the development of career assessment as having always been a multistoried history but a history that has been singularly dominated by the story of quantitative career assessment. Importantly, McMahon (2008) suggests that the dominance of a quantitative approach to career assessment has "silenced or overshadowed a possible alternative story" (p. 589) of qualitative career assessment. Other authors have emphasised that the assessment movement that grew out of Parsons' (1909) seminal work was always intended to be both quantitative and qualitative in nature (O'Brien, 2001), that Parsons emphasised context, active client involvement in assessment and a range of intra- and inter-personal factors that needed to be considered in a more holistic assessment of an individual's career development. Evidence of this is provided in Parson's suggestions for a more comprehensive approach to career assessment that would go beyond the mere scoring of traits and the simpler notion of matching such scores to related work environments. Thus Parsons suggested several more qualitative approaches in the assessment of an individual's career development. He referred, for instance, to the "picture-method" (p. 24) which was a precursor of the use of metaphor in which imagery was provided to clients in order for them to conceptually reassess their present understanding. An example would be his image of the alternatives of running a race tied to an iron ball or running without such an encumbrance. Parsons also encouraged clients to peruse magazines in order to identify "biographical" imagery

of "leading men in their youth" (p. 24). The latter exercise provides historical echoes of steps Savickas (1989) suggests within his Career Style Interview.

The Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa have a saying that 'It dies and rises like the moon', that is that issues keep returning. The saying captures in many ways the history of career assessment. There is a recycling dynamic in career assessment. This is evident on the one level in the re-invention of certain constructs that return to favour sometimes decades after they are first proposed. Take, for example, the movement towards constructivist career theory and the resultant need to assess the concept of career adaptability (Savickas, 2005). Even within the more stable and simplified world of work within which Parsons developed his career theory, he placed great emphasis on the need for adaptation in clients' career development. Parsons (1909) was quite unequivocal in this regard: "But the fundamental question that outranks all the others is the question of adaptation" (p. 13). In more recent decades the concept of career adaptation has been re-emphasised and both quantitative and qualitative assessments of this construct have emerged (see, for instance, the special issue of the Journal of Vocational Behavior, 2012, volume 80, in this regard).

On another level, there has been a recycling of the idea that quantitative and qualitative career assessment may co-exist and indeed be viewed as complementary. The debate on the relative value of these two forms of career assessment has moved gradually from an either-or binary to a both-and perspective. Watson and McMahon (2014) have described the failure to consider the complementarity of these two forms of assessments as "an unhelpful divide that has positioned many career practitioners in dichotomized approaches to career counseling and assessment" (p. 631). Thus there is a need to recycle back to Parsons' (1909) original concept of a more holistic perspective of career assessment that combines both forms of assessment, an approach to career assessment that would emphasise convergence rather than divergence (Sampson, 2009; Savickas, 2000). Several chapters in this book describe this movement towards a complementary approach to career assessment. It is not that qualitative career assessment has been recently discovered. Indeed, McMahon (2008) states emphatically that "qualitative career assessment is most certainly not something new" (p. 591). It is rather that the overly dominant story of quantitative career assessment no longer adequately meets the increasing diversity of contexts in which career assessment needs to occur. Thus there is an increasing call to redress the balance in career assessment, to move from a singular story to a multistory assessment process that is better able to accommodate the increasing complexities, and subjectivity, of individual career development in the twenty-first century. There are numerous examples of how authors have risen to the challenge of combining quantitative and qualitative career assessment in pragmatic ways, examples of which are evident in this book.

A MODEL STORY OF CAREER ASSESSMENT

Frank Parsons' (1909) advice about the career choice process could equally apply to career practitioners and their selection and use of both quantitative and qualitative

career assessment: "It is better to sail with compass and chart than to drift into an occupation haphazard or by chance, proximity, or uninformed selection" (p. 101). It is advice we could well heed but in conjunction with Arulmani's (2014) warning that "the stance taken toward assessment is often a reflection of the career counselor's theoretical and philosophical positions" (p. 609). Sure career practitioners need to chart their way through the proliferation of career assessment that is presently available but they also need to consider what criteria or compass they would use to do that. Thus, Osborn and Zunker (2006) call on career practitioners to consider the issue of career assessment by using a conceptual model that would help determine both the purpose of testing as well as the interpretation of the results of such assessment. They suggest that such a model needs to be flexible given the complexities of career development in the times we practice in. An example of such a model, and indeed a guide for career practitioners, is offered by McMahon and Patton in their chapter in this book on incorporating career assessment in career counselling.

Osborn and Zunker (2006) propose a model that consists of five steps and the present authors are of the opinion that these steps provide a generic framework that most career practitioners could adapt to meet the contexts within which they practice. The first step requires an analysis of needs which would help not only in the establishment of the career counselling relationship but also in identifying what the client's needs are. The second step requires establishing the purpose of testing, a step that would attempt to relate the purpose of testing to the needs of the client as identified in the first step. It is in the third step that the career practitioner considers the issue of what assessment to undertake. While Osborn and Zunker operationalise this step more in terms of quantitative measures, this step would allow both the career practitioner and the client to jointly consider the value of quantitative or qualitative assessment or both. The fourth step involves the use of the assessment results. Given the uniqueness of individual career development and the diverse and often cultural contexts in which such development takes place, any assessment results – whether quantitative or qualitative – need to be contextually interpreted. The final step of making a decision is the operational culmination of the preceding four steps. An important point stressed by Osborn and Zunker with this proposed model is that it has a recursive nature in that, as a consequence of implementing later steps, the individual may recycle to earlier steps.

CONCLUSION

McMahon (2008) suggests that the re-emphasis on qualitative forms of career assessment may continue to flourish with the emergence of practical counselling and assessment approaches in the career literature. Watson and McMahon (2014) caution, however, that a reason why quantitative career assessment has remained so dominant is that it lends itself more readily to practical application. The discussion of qualitative career assessment has remained largely that, a theoretical consideration, a point made by Stead and Davis in their chapter in this book on the research evidence

base for qualitative career assessment. Yet there is increasingly a wide diversity of qualitative career assessment processes emerging in the literature and this book provides the reader with the opportunity to explore what is presently available.

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2. A PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATION OF QUALITATIVE CAREER ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter entails a consideration of the philosophical dimensions of career assessment as an act of social construction. As a philosophical chapter that necessarily renders our own values in this text, we declare our endorsement of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen & Davis, 1985) and the Systems Theory Framework of career development (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014). Indeed, we present this statement quite deliberately for we believe it is incumbent upon all scholars and practitioners who engage in a process of a philosophical consideration to metaphorically wear their epistemic and professional values on their sleeves to ensure transparency and understanding (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013). Thus, the chapter begins with a selection of historical moments in the evolution of the field of career development. We present a caution that career assessment—qualitative and quantitative—is itself an historical, culturally constructed entity that manifests the power of career practitioners afforded them by clients' unwitting collusion with the discourse of career. We then present a conceptualisation of narrative through the lens of social constructionism.

CAREER ASSESSMENT AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: A PSYCHOTECHNOLOGY

The close of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries was an era of technology, industry, immigration, and war. In this tumultuous time, one finds the likes of social reformer Frank Parsons (1909) whose commitment to the employment of immigrants saw the emergence of what can only be described as the classical model of career assessment, and the philosopher of education and society, John Dewey (1916), who extolled the inseparability of learning and work as the foundation of democratic society. In this era *vocational psychology* (Hollingworth, 1916) emerged as a branch of a new discipline, *applied psychology*, otherwise known as "psychotechnics" or "psychotechnology" (Geissler, 1917).

Yet, it was an era in which the scientific assessment of a person and the capacity for work was, by current standards, inchoate and unsophisticated, but it was already flexing its power as a scientific discourse. The quotation below is drawn from a paper

in which the author discusses the role of individuals with an intellectual disability in the Great War, WWI.

> The moron fits into the cogs of a big system with very little friction. He is content to eat and sleep and dress and work as a part of a machine with machine-like regularity. Such monotony he can understand and appreciate. (Mateer, 1917)

The contemporary scholar may recoil at the ostensibly discriminatory language because these words speak more than what is written. The lines should alert one to reflect on the current discourse of career assessment and counselling (cf., McIlveen & Patton, 2006). The lines are indicative of a discourse of power whereby the client/the subject of the assessment is in the gaze of the practitioner. Regardless of whether career assessment entails quantitative and/or qualitative procedures, both are instruments of an agent whose power is dependent upon the very discourse that is used to theorise, formulate, and assess the apparent needs of the client. The agent in this case is the practitioner. This assertion should be read as a warning against *presentist bias*—that of adjudging past standards by current standards (cf., Thorne & Henley, 2005). Just as the misuse of psychometrics has been criticised (e.g., McIlveen & Patton, 2006), social constructionism's epistemological and rhetorical discourse for qualitative career assessment makes it just as much a tool of power; for it is within the dialogue of counselling that the practitioner has the power to manipulate what is deemed meaningful. This power is writ large in the notion of *co-construction* whereby the client and practitioner together develop a narrative for the client. Of course, a practitioner's intentions should be caring; however, the fact is that the practitioner is inherently in the process of co-construction, and not an objective observer on the side.

Cultures, mores, and conventions evolve with societies and the meaning of work concomitantly evolves. Thus, it is apposite to consider the philosophical roots of the meaning of work in people's lives (cf., Blustein, 2006). As a paradigm for the formulation and application of theories and practices of career assessment, social constructionism emphasises the contextual, historical ways of being, knowing, and doing (Young & Popadiuk, 2012). However, taking a contextual perspective is not simply a matter of gathering facts in a career assessment interview and arriving at an understanding of a client's environment; to the social constructionist, context is much more. To be precise, social constructionists attend to context by way of discourse and its capacity to create knowledge/power (cf. Foucault, 1972). This is a crucial assumption upon which to proceed because it is the axis of the turn toward discursive psychology and radical formulations of sense of self promulgated by scholars such as Hermans (2006). But, first, in order to arrive at that radical perspective and to provide a vehicle for social constructionist thinking of work and career, we must turn to the STF as a conceptual framework for career development that decentres the individual amidst a context of influences and provides a new way to apprehend the meaning of work in people's lives.

SYSTEMS THEORY FRAMEWORK, THE DECENTRED INDIVIDUAL, AND FOUR-DIMENSIONALISM

The social constructionist paradigm can be manifested by application of the Systems Theory Framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Although the STF lends itself to other paradigms, Patton and McMahon have tended toward social constructionism in their scholarship of career counselling that is informed by the STF (e.g., McMahon & Patton, 2006). The STF's contextualisation of the individual extends from the intrapersonal influences that are embodied in the individual (e.g., physical attributes, values) through to the influences that constitute the individual's interpersonal, social world (e.g., friendships, family), and the environmental-societal system (e.g., school, work, government). From the perspective of the STF, an individual cannot be empathically understood as an entity that is ontologically distinct from context; he or she can be understood only as a person-in-context. Seen objectively, the multiple influences in the STF are understood to be in a state of flux, constantly evolving as a result of their recursive effects on one another, concomitantly manifesting the influence of chance, happenstance, or *Acts of God*. The STF also requires the scholar to historicise the individual. Accordingly, a person cannot be empathically understood as a psychological snapshot at a point in time; he or she has a past, present, and imagined future. In sum, the STF presents a four-dimensional framework of an individual: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental-societal influences, in and across time.

The ontological understanding of the dimension of time in this paradigm aligns with the theory of four-dimensionalism, which seeks to explain the long-standing question of how objects persist and change through time (Koslicki, 2003). The theory of four-dimensionalism (Sider, 2001, 2003) posits that objects, which could include people and events (Rea, 2003), have temporal parts, and therefore can persist and change through time. For example, a steaming hot cup of tea can be described as having certain properties. One of those properties is a temporal one: it exists in the now in which it is observed or experienced. One hour later, the same cup of tea may still be sitting on the desk, un-sipped. In that case, according to the four-dimensionalist stance, it is understood to be the same object, with some of the same properties as before, but also with some different properties. There has been a change in the property of relative temperature—from hot to cold—and it also has a different temporal property (it is one hour later than the previous time). For four-dimensional theory, the steaming hot cup of tea now and the cooled cup of tea in one hour's time have the same ontological status of existence. As Rea (2003) explains, objects which are not present owing to different temporal properties (e.g., being in the future or past) are like objects that are not present due to different spatial properties (e.g., being in another country or on another planet). Both objects exist; they just do not exist where/when we are (here and now).

It may seem pedantic to discuss the ontological status of objects that are distant in time; however, four-dimensionalism suggests a radically alternative ontological stance from which to examine the concepts encompassed in the notion of career assessment. Much that has been written about career assessment conceptualises it as a static three-dimensional object or state, that is, it can be described without reference to specific time. We would argue that career assessment is ontologically four-dimensional, and that its temporal properties are significant. According to this four-dimensional view, the notion of 'person' cannot be completely dissociated from past, present and future experiences. To remove the past and future and capture only the present, is to capture a caricature of the concept of person: one that has been artificially reduced for the purposes of recording and analysis. Indeed, it is impossible to apprehend a person's identity without including stories of the past, present, and future, all spoken and read as a continuous biography, albeit with twists, turns, and stories *told, untold, silenced*, and/or *forgotten* (cf., McMahon, 2006).

Imagine a personal photo album. At the front of the album there are photos of a person who is younger, perhaps a child. Over time, new photographs are added to the album. Naturally enough, the subject of the photographs appears to age with the turning of each page of the album. Each photograph is a snapshot in time and one can discern physical changes in the subject over time. Yet, the album is silent. Although a picture is worth a thousand words, in this album the photographs per se do not speak; they do not tell a story. It is the beholder of the photographs who creates and tells a story by describing the events in each, and their connections to other photographs on previous and subsequent pages, in other points in space and time. The aim of career assessment is to collect, select, and reflect on the images and experiences of a life, and to connect them together as a coherent story that is incomplete and open-ended, and that is understood as an ongoing conversation with oneself and the world.

A radical approach to social constructionism holds the ontological assumption that: (a) a person's reality is socially constructed; (b) reality is psychologically experienced; and, moreover, (c) experience is constituted of psychological representations of discourses that are culturally mediated in and across time. In other words, there is not an essential self within a person; instead, a person's sense of self is a rendering of the discourses that have spoken and currently speak a person into the present and anticipated future reality the person experiences. Indeed, social constructionism assumes that "the most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 172). Thus, a person's sense of self is utterly bound by discourse and culture. Stories and storying, therefore, are the grist of identity, subjectively experienced and objectively described. Accordingly, we assert that, along with context and time, story is an ontological and epistemological tenet that constitutes the rhetoric and methods of qualitative career assessment.

STF AND STORY

Rather than being considered as the site of isolated facts to be assessed, the influences identified in the STF can be made meaningful through the *process influence* of *story*. Patton and McMahon (2014) posit story as an important element of meaning-making, both subjectively from the client's perspective and objectively from the practitioner's perspective. In this way, a client may tell a story about his/her life autobiographically, and a practitioner may formulate a story of his/her life as a biography.

Transcending the subjective-objective dichotomy of the client-practitioner stories, adherence to the STF as a social constructionist framework requires the practitioner to consider the convergence of the influences of the client and practitioner. From a classical perspective, this convergence may be seen as the transference-countertransference dynamic. However, social constructionists depart from the classical position because they must assume that the talk and action that go on between client and practitioner constitute a form of co-construction. Co-construction implies a joint effort. Patton and McMahon (2014) depict this confluence of influences as the STF influences of client and practitioner enclosed as a "therapeutic system" (p. 368).

A significant implication of this view of career assessment pertains to the knowledge and power relations within the therapeutic system. Career assessment as a process per se and the technology it deploys (e.g., psychometric tests, qualitative interview schedules) are a discursive practice that is administered by professionals who have their own sub-cultural discourse that is constitutive of a form of knowledge and power (McIlveen & Patton, 2006). For example, two career practitioners talking about a client's interests as being *realistic* and *investigative*, as in Holland's (1997) typology, or as a client's *career theme*, as in Savickas' (2011) model of narrative career counselling, may very well understand one another; however, the meaning of these words do not necessarily nor immediately convey the same for the client. Thus, the idea of confluence between client and practitioner requires a commitment to reflexive practice whereby a practitioner develops a subjective and an objectified awareness of his/her dialogue and influence within the therapeutic system, perhaps by professional supervision (Patton & McMahon, 2014) or self-supervision (McIlveen & Patton, 2010).

THE PROCESS OF STORYING THROUGH TIME

Story may be an historical account of one's life, or it may be an open-ended narrative that portends possible futures and, moreover, through the lens of the STF, story can be theorised in terms of the psychological processes of *dialogical self* (McIlveen, 2007). In this way, a person's story may be generated from different personal perspectives or *I-positions* (Hermans, 2006) that are constitutive of the multiple influences identified in the STF. Furthermore, these different I-positions may engage in dialogue with one another, thereby decentring the individual to include influences

beyond the boundaries of his/her flesh as constitutive of his/her reality, and these influences may have temporal dimensions of past, present and/or anticipated future. As much a personal narrative generated by oneself, in social constructionist terms, story is necessarily a dialogue that is shared and created with others who comprise the contextual influences of an individual.

Although reinterpretation of the past is inherent to social constructionist career assessment, particularly through a process of co-construction with the practitioner, simply interpreting a person's past as if it were a collection of bygone facts is not necessarily social constructionism. To assess, as in to engage in a process of career assessment, implies that there is an entity to assess, to observe, to capture, to appraise, to somehow measure. Here, the very words compel one to construct an entity, firmly fixed in time, in the process of assessing. Represented as word, image or sensation, the entity that is assessed is pragmatically real enough to the beholder—the client, the practitioner. Here, we present a vision of career assessment that is radically social constructionist in its philosophy and demonstrate how coming to know a sense of one's self through career assessment and its attendant processes (e.g., co-construction) is more than simply reinterpreting the past so as to effectively operate in the present world-of-work. More than this, social constructionism holds that meaning does not reside in one's head, as it were, in a mentalist sense; instead, meaning resides in discourses that are spoken, read, and signed as cultures.

This ontological and epistemological emphasis implies that the process of knowing and the product of knowing—knowledge—are contingent upon processes and products that have gone before. Adherence to the social constructionist paradigm requires one to accept that what is (re)created as to be new in the present time has a relationship from whence it came. Thus, what is deemed new in the present time is not completely new; ontologically, it persists as a lived reality. With respect to career assessment, one may develop a new perspective of one's sense of self by: (a) learning new ways of knowing; so as to (b) produce new knowledge of one's sense of self in the world; and consequently (c) to act out one's career in the world on the basis of the new way of knowing one's sense of self. All of these processes operate in and through time.

CONCLUSION

The presumed epistemological differences between quantitative and qualitative career assessment methods are not manifest in a person's lived experience of a career story; that is, the story the person knows, rehearses, and revises over time. Regardless of whether a person's story is generated on the basis of personality tests or creative writing, the process of storying and making meaning through the rhetoric and methods of quantitative and qualitative career assessment is the same: the person constructs a psychological reality in conversation with the practitioner (and others). That a person's personality is objectively described as XYZ type matters little; what matters most is how the person and others, especially the practitioner, talk and

write about being an XYZ type—this is the reification of identity in talk and text as story. Thus, we directly appeal to you—the reader—to consider the philosophical foundations on which you construct your career development practice and ensure that there is correspondence between the assumptions of what you believe constitutes reality (i.e., ontology); how you know and create knowledge (i.e., epistemology); how and what you value as knowledge (i.e., axiology); how you use the technical language, words, and symbols of knowledge (i.e., rhetoric, discourse); and, most of all, how you put all of the aforementioned into practice.

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