

Integrating Narrative Approaches with Early Recollections to Provide Career Counseling With Low-SES Secondary Students

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Abstract

Because of the school focus on academics, school counselors have little time for career counseling activities for students that prepare and highlight the work–life task. Students from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds do not have the resources or opportunities to explore their career identity using traditional methods. Therefore, it is important that school counselors provide individualized career counseling using a narrative approach to help such students address the work–life task and develop a clear career identity. Adding a narrative approach that includes the use of early recollections enhances traditional career counseling practices by emphasizing students' strengths, adaptability, flexibility, and lifelong learning to adapt to the world of work in the 21st century.

Keywords: early recollections and career counseling, narrative career counseling, low-SES students, school counseling, work–life task

Because of the school focus on academic performance outcomes (i.e., standardized test scores), many students in high school have not experienced activities and preparation that highlights the work–life task. This is particularly true for students from low-income families who attend school districts with less revenue and resources. Assisting these students in developing a career identity is an especially important initiative. This article reviews the career counseling needs of students, the literature concerning the approaches of secondary school counselors to career counseling, and the importance of adding a narrative approach using early recollections to current career counseling practices in order to address the work–life task of economically disadvantaged students.

Low-SES Students and Career Identity

Many high school students experience difficulty forming a career identity. However, students from families and communities of low socioeconomic status (SES) have more difficulty because of other obstacles that interfere with their ability to develop a positive work identity (Furlong, Biggart, & Cartmel, 1996). Students in impoverished areas experience hardships that limit parents' ability to provide educational resources such as school supplies,

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computers, books, and other educational opportunities outside of school (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Furthermore, students from low-SES homes and communities develop academic skills more slowly than affluent students do, are more likely to drop out of high school, and are less likely to attend or complete college or technical or vocational education, which limits their ability to find a job or choose a meaningful career (American Psychological Association, APA, 2014). Students living in poorer areas have trouble seeing their idealistic aspirations over their realistic aspirations (Furlong et al., 1996) and have difficulty processing the transition from school to work because of the lack of individual resources, preferences, and choices (Lapan, Mark, & Marc, 2007; Wicht & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2014).

According to Gottfredson (2002), the choice of occupation is best understood by considering a person's individual, socially embedded life history (Bourdieu, 1977), which is based on circumscription and compromise. Schoolchildren who grow up in a low SES environment tend to choose an occupation on the basis of benefits and costs (i.e., relative risk aversion), familial influences, peers, and other contextual factors. Circumscription (Gottfredson, 2002) is a person's experience involving orientation to social roles or norms that shapes his or her perceptions of accessibility and feelings about the suitability of an occupation, which is an important role in the process of compromise. Parents' occupation and perspective of themselves, along with social class, is very influential in this circumscription (Becker, 1978; Breen & Golthorpe, 1997; Gambetta, 1996; Mills, 1980).

Past research investigating circumscription and career aspirations has found that adolescents from low-SES environments tend to have lower occupational aspirations (Kabiru, Mojola, Beguy, & Okigbo, 2013), hold inflexible career beliefs, and attribute academic and career success to an external locus of control rather than an internal locus of control, as compared to students from middle- and upper-class environments (Turner & Ziebell, 2011). Therefore, students choose a more realistic or acceptable occupation according to their perceived external limitations (Wicht & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2014). To add to the complexity of occupational choice is school climate or "ethos" (Donnelly, 2000). School climate has been found to induce a great amount of influence over a student's self-efficacy and occupational aspirations as well as encourage or discourage parent involvement (Feuerstein, 2000).

Parental expectations and involvement in a child's postsecondary education are two significant variables influencing students' future education and career success (Trusty, 2004; Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005). Many low-income parents have a negative view of public school and feel unsupported by faculty and staff who view parents as the problem and label their children as "at risk" (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Parents who have experienced frequent negative feedback or who have had a negative experience

as students themselves refrain from contacting their child's school or participating in activities that could improve their child's academic and career success (Lott, 2001; Ramirez, 2003). For this reason, school counselors need to take into consideration all the contextual influences on student self-perception and circumscription that may interfere with developing a career identity. With this in mind, it is important to note that school counselors are in a special position to help students with career development and should be providing more career counseling for students, especially in schools with a high percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch (Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012; Education Trust, 2000; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & Dupont, 2010; Lapan, 2012).

Current School Counseling Practices

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012, 2014), school counselors are to develop a comprehensive school counseling program to prepare all students for their college and career goals. Using standards established in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012), school counselors are to address three domains: academic, personal/social, and career development. These standards encompass noncognitive factors such as persistence, resilience, goal setting, and motivation (ASCA, 2014). School counselors provide career counseling activities for all students, but they have not been successful in meeting the needs of diverse student populations. The problem with reaching these students may not be the amount of counseling but rather the type of career counseling provided (Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012; Lapan, 2012). The type of career counseling activities that school counselors currently perform consists of collaborating with students and parents or guardians to help students create a 4-year plan to graduation based on their chosen college and career path (Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012; Solberg & Larson, 2013). School counselors offer information on high school course offerings, career options, and the academic and career training needed for a particular career, and provide this information to teachers, administrators, and parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). This approach may work well for more affluent students, but not so well for economically disadvantaged students, who need more support and individual counseling to address career development (Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012).

In a 2010 Public Agenda national study, 55% of young adults reported not receiving the career counseling they needed and felt like they were "just another face in the crowd" (Lapan, 2012, p. 85). Half of participants in that study also reported needing a more personalized approach from their counselor. The students who received personalized career counseling were found to be more likely to attend college, to make better decisions on a suitable college, to receive financial aid, and to believe they had a better chance of finding a good job after graduation (Lapan, 2012).

Other research has shown that students who participate in individualized career counseling improve their motivation in all areas such as behavior, attendance, and academic achievement (Lapan & Harrington, 2010). Using a career counseling program that is more individualized is linked to students taking a higher number of advanced courses, higher standardized test scores, and greater success in college. Most important, individualized career counseling approaches tend to help economically disadvantaged students develop a self-constructed future (Flum & Blustein, 2000; Lapan, 2004) that equips them to make a plan, and then search, prepare, and apply to colleges and postsecondary training institutions (Lapan & Harrington, 2010).

It is apparent that current practices in secondary school counseling are not meeting the career development needs of all students (Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). School counseling programs continue to use traditional career counseling models that emphasize self-knowledge, occupational knowledge, and matching the person to the best career fit without regard to contextual factors that hinder a student from making a career decision (Krumboltz, 1993). Although these theories and models have contributed greatly to career counseling in schools, they rely on predictability in career decision making that is founded on developmental stages and a stable societal context that may not be congruent with the present, ever-changing work environment of the 21st century (Savickas et al., 2009).

Narrative Career Counseling With an Individual Psychology Approach

Current career theorists have determined that career is more about designing a holistic way of living rather than finding a career fit (Hall, 2002; Savickas, 2011). For career counseling programs to be effective, they must emphasize strengths, adaptability, flexibility, and lifelong learning for students to adapt to the world of work (Savickas et al., 2009). According to Krumboltz (1993), career is essential to human happiness because personal and career problems are intertwined. Career directly affects a person's way of living and personal life affects individuals' work. Krumboltz noticed that people struggling to make a career decision and/or who experience "zete-phobia," a fear of career exploration, will either avoid making a career decision or make a quick decision to avoid the feelings of fear and anxiety. To some, making a career decision is a lifelong commitment that cannot be changed.

Taking an Individual Psychology approach to narrative career counseling provides a way for adolescents to face their fear by looking at contextual problems enmeshed with career, reformulating them, and looking at other possibilities to change their career story. This approach has the potential to enhance traditional approaches to career counseling in schools and provide a framework for developing student career identity (Stoltz &

Apodaca, 2017), especially for low-SES students who need more help with their personal and social, academic, and career development (Richard, Mark, & Marc, 2007). To reach all students, particularly low-SES students, school counselors and licensed professional counselors who work with school-aged children should consider the additive measure of incorporating a narrative approach with existing career counseling approaches to help students experience activities that address the work–life task (Savickas, 1995; Savickas et al., 2009).

Narrative career counseling has been shown to work well for the developmental level of adolescent students (Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). Adolescents have a strong desire for autonomy; they believe they are able to view their own thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes more accurately than others can; and they have a high sensitivity to personal criticism (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Shears, 2003; Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). Because narrative career counseling is a storied approach, it enables adolescents to take the role of author and expert of their own career story, thereby addressing their need for autonomy, self-reflection, and self-evaluation (Bujold, 2004). Additionally, a narrative approach works well with traditional career counseling models often used by school counselors, such as Holland's (1997) typology and Super's (1990) life span development model (see also Stoltz, Wolff, & McLelland, 2011), and can be used with quantitative assessments such as the Self-Directed Search (Holland, Powell, & Fritzsche, 1994), thus permitting students to confirm or dispute the quantitative data that does not match their view of self and to develop their own personal identity (Brott, 2001).

Identity is seen as a central construct in building a career in the 21st century. To be successful, people in today's workforce need to be flexible, adaptable, and lifelong learners (Blustein, 2006; Hall, 1996, 2002; Savickas, 2011). Creating an identity requires individuals to know their strengths, limitations, and lifestyle goals to obtain a meaningful career that evolves over time. Using an Individual Psychology approach to career counseling allows for each person to examine a series of narratives unique to him or her, ultimately culminating into a personal career identity (McAdams, 2006; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006).

Narrative Therapy

To better understand narrative career counseling, we must look at its theoretical underpinning, narrative therapy, which emerged from post-modernism, social constructionism, and family therapy (Corey, 2001). In narrative therapy, a person's view of self is based on perceptions of lived experiences within his or her sociocultural environment. According to social constructionists, White and Epston (1990), an individual's view of self is greatly influenced by interactions with others in the dominant culture.

People construct the meaning of life either “monologically” or “dialogically” from these interactions to create an interpretive life story (Corey, 2001). These personal stories in the mind cultivate into truths about self and others. Clients can have multiple stories, positive and negative, about the past, present, and future with family, friends, work, and community (Morgan, 2002; White, 1995). In narrative therapy, the goal is to help clients tell their story, examine it, and reauthor it. The role of the therapist is to be an empathic listener and collaborator. Anderson and Goolishian (1992) called this a “not-knowing position,” where the client is the expert and the therapist is the curious listener of the client’s stories. As the stories are being told, the therapist analyzes the characters, setting, plot, and themes, and asks questions about salient moments, influential relationships, motives, and turning points to allow the client to look externally at his or her internalizing belief system or problems. This enables the client to separate the problem from the person and discover the common themes and meanings behind his or her stories to create an alternative story (White, 1995).

Narrative counseling is also based on tenets of Individual Psychology, especially the use of early recollections. Early recollections (ERs) are used to provide a way to tell one’s earliest memories, salient experiences, and events (Schnieder, 1998). Adler is credited as a central figure in using autobiographical memories (i.e., ERs) to understand personality and identity (McAdams, 1993). Adler considered these early memories as a projection of self from the past onto the present self. He called them “stories of my life” (Adler, 1938, 1992). Adler found early recollections useful in helping clients because he believed they were purposefully kept in memory and chosen as part of a person’s life story and were consistent with a person’s lifestyle or life themes (Ansbacher, 1947). Holland (1966) also believed that vocation was just one part of a person’s expression of personality and that his inventory could represent a pattern of living. He likened it to Adler’s theory about “life style” and career choice (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Using a narrative approach provides a way to draw out these important ERs of a person’s life story that are significant to that person (Savickas, 2011) and reveals how that person approaches life tasks: work, community, and love (Adler, 1992). The narrative approach also permits individuals to explore and uncover their career identity, interests, values, adaptability, and overall life themes (Savickas, 2005; Stoltz & Barclay, 2015).

Narratives provide a holistic picture of self, foster resilience, build self-efficacy, and help students find meaning and purpose in their future career choices (Schnieder, 1998). Having an unfinished story motivates students to move beyond their challenges, find personal meaning in their work–life, and design a career plan they desire (Maree, 2013a, 2013b). These personal stories help students see that they are the expert and author of their own career

story (Shepard & Marshall, 2000). Furthermore, narrative career counseling used with traditional career counseling has been shown to be beneficial to the development of a career identity in minority and nonminority populations (Reh fuss, Del Corso, Galvin, & Wykes, 2011; Savickas, 1995; Stoltz et al., 2011; Taber & Briddick, 2011) and may prove useful in helping low-SES secondary students in developing a career identity as well.

Using Narrative Career Counseling in a School Setting

Narrative career counseling is a storytelling approach that uses both inductive and deductive qualitative processes (Brott, 2001; Patton & McMahon, 1999). Narrative career counseling is different from traditional career counseling in that the counselor is more of a facilitator rather than an expert. Instead of telling the student what to do, the counselor develops a collaborative relationship with the student and assists the student in the storytelling process and in looking at life themes, vocational personality, and sources of adaptability (Savickas, 2005).

One of the earliest examples of narrative career counseling is the “storied approach” developed by Brott (2001). The storied approach involves counselors assisting students in telling their stories, which are composed of early recollections, present stories, and future stories involving various life roles: family, student, worker, leisure, and community. The stories are titled, expanded, peopled, and detailed with the assistance of the counselor. As the stories are examined, the counselor encourages the student to explore the meanings behind the stories and uses questioning to examine defining moments, sparkling moments, high and low points, opening space, and preferences (Brott, 2001).

This storied approach involves three phases: (a) co-construction (reveal), (b) deconstruction (unpack), and (c) construction (reauthor). In the first phase, co-construction, counselor and student work collaboratively to tell and understand the student’s life story through early recollections or life scripts. These life stories are a window onto the student’s personal, professional, and societal growth needs (Savickas, 2011).

The use of ERs is an important element of this phase (Maree, 2010; Savickas, 2011; Stoltz & Apodaca, 2017). When a counselor is working with adolescents using ERs, the counselor must first build a therapeutic relationship. Next, the counselor should ask whether the student is willing to participate in an activity concerning events from his or her earliest childhood memories. Last, the counselor directs the participant in remembering a specific scene from his or her own memory, not a story from another person. The counselor asks about the most salient moment in the event and the emotion felt at that moment. During this part of the session, the counselor must record, as accurately as possible, the event in writing for the student to

review and explore. Using the student's ERs, the counselor and the student are able to see emerging patterns and overall "lines of movement" in the story (Brott, 2001; Patton & McMahon, 1999).

In the deconstruction phase, the counselor and student examine the stories presented by the student by viewing them from different perspectives and working together to identify career life patterns and themes, as well as recognizing areas that need further exploration. This exploration may include discussing high and low points of the stories and defining values, interests, and preferred ways of being in the world (McKelvie, 1979). In this phase, the counselor may assist students by discussing vocational personality, career adaptability or strengths for facing the career task, and work roles that matter to the student (Reh fuss et al., 2011; Reh fuss & Di Fabio, 2012). Additionally, the counselor must consider physical handicaps, family dynamics, and societal issues that may greatly influence the student's feelings of inferiority contributing to life patterns or themes, which in turn may hinder the student's ability to develop a career identity (Adler, 1992). Looking at these past memories helps the student crystallize the relationship between past and present (Brott, 2001; Patton & McMahon, 1999).

An important aspect of this phase is the student's ability to challenge private logic or negative filters about the self that have been a barrier to moving forward and making decisions. Looking at various options and different perspectives helps the student to refute these negative filters. Throughout the narrative career counseling process, the counselor works collaboratively with the student by looking at themes that help with understanding the student's identity and meaningfulness gained in work endeavors. Techniques used to develop themes involve emotions, private logic, looking at patterns and striving, as well as overuse and underuse of strengths (Brott, 2001; Patton & McMahon, 1999; Savickas, 2011).

The last phase, construction, focuses on patterns and themes the student wishes to develop or diminish, such as strengths and weaknesses or self-defeating patterns (Brott, 2001). Counselor and student review which strengths and abilities the student has used in the past to adapt and survive (Savickas, 1995, 2011). With the help of the counselor, the student can author his or her own future story by clarifying choices, generating alternatives, and extending plotlines (Brott, 2001).

The goal of these narrative career counseling phases is to support students' exploration of their life stories to increase their focus on how they adapt to career tasks, narrate their lives, and work to improve their self-efficacy, career identity, and flexibility in order to participate in meaningful activities that lead to fulfilling careers (Savickas et al., 2009). What follows is a fictional case example highlighting the use of ERs in developing a student's narrative. The ERs have been created to provide examples for understanding the approach and do not represent materials from real clients.

Fictional Case Study

Patricia is a 17-year-old, White, heterosexual, female high school student who is considering dropping out. Patricia is undecided about her future and has come to see the counselor to talk about career options. She has expressed the desire to help her family earn more money by quitting school and working. Patricia's family lives in a rural area, and her mother works as a waitress at a local restaurant. Her father works at a poultry plant, where he cleans equipment. Currently, Patricia is worried that her parents will lose the family home and become homeless.

The school counselor listens empathically and reflects the various aspects of Patricia's story. The counselor acknowledges Patricia's desire to continue attending school and to see the counselor about her career options. Here, the school counselor points out that her behavior told a different story, one in which Patricia recognizes her desire to complete high school but feels pulled by her family's needs. Patricia begins to cry and says, "I feel pulled in so many directions." The counselor reassures her that they will work through the situation and form a plan to assist her in making decisions. The first step is to collect some early memories to understand more about her. Patricia agrees, and the following represent her ERs:

"Look, Mommy, I Can Read!":

"I remember when I was very young and just learning to read. I went to my mother with my favorite storybook to show her how I was learning to read. She had been working all day and was too tired to listen. I remember feeling so hurt, so I went outside and sat under the big tree to read. I eventually fell asleep and my daddy came and put me to bed."

My Very Own Kitty:

"When I was in third grade I found a stray cat. I was so excited, because I always wanted a pet, but my parents said we could not afford the food and vet bills. I took the cat to an old shed in the backyard and made a home for it. I would sneak food to the cat after breakfast and dinner. I really loved that cat. One day I came home and ran to the shed and to my surprise, there were kittens. I was elated. My parents found out and they let me keep the cat but I had to give the kittens away. I enjoyed taking care of them and thought of them as my friends. I was proud that I was able to give each cat a good home. I still love animals. That is a nice memory for me."

Wandering Off for a Meal:

"Once, when I was five or so, I was hungry and went to my mother asking her to make me breakfast. She had just finished working a night shift and I could not wake her. So, I took out to the neighbors. I showed up on the front porch. They invited me in for breakfast. I ate until I was full and thanked them, then I went back home. When I walked in the door, my mother ran over to

me, hugging me. I did not realize I had been gone for several hours and she was worried. When I told her what happened she fussed at me and told me to never beg for food again. I felt embarrassed after that."

The counselor and Patricia begin to talk about the content in the ERs. From the first memory, the counselor points out to Patricia that she was very resilient and strong to provide for herself when her mother was too tired to interact. Patricia seems baffled by this comment and states, "I never thought of that." The counselor explains that she was able to go ahead and read for herself rather than be angry with her mother. Additionally, the counselor offers that it was important to Patricia to show her parents her accomplishment and let them be proud of her. Patricia agrees, saying that she respects her parents immensely and wants them to be proud of her.

Two themes of Patricia's lifestyle emerged from her first memory: her ability to persevere and depend on herself, and her conscientiousness and concern about what her family thinks of her. These two aspects of her lifestyle indicate that Patricia can work through adversity with positive coping and that she strives to be respected by her parents.

The second ER indicates a preferred work interest and setting. Patricia focused on caring for animals. When the school counselor mentions this to Patricia, she smiles and nods her head. Then, the school counselor asks her if she has ever been in a veterinarian's office. Patricia responds, "No. Why?" The counselor says that there are employees that care for all the animals when they are sick and in the animal hospital. Patricia's eyes light up: "Really, I did not know there were jobs like that." The counselor notes that they can talk about this later when they use the computer to look at specific jobs and opportunities. Patricia appears engaged and excited about the possibility.

The third ER included the theme of self-reliance. The counselor shares that Patricia's wandering off was a way of meeting her needs and taking care of herself. She responds, "Well, I never thought of it like that, but now that you say it, I can see it. I like your perspectives. For all these years I felt bad about it because my mom was so angry with me and embarrassed. But I see what you mean here; I really am able to find ways to get my needs met."

Next, the school counselor asks Patricia to apply these life themes to her present situation. Patricia seems perplexed, so the school counselor intimates: "You just said that you find ways to get your needs met. So how can you continue in school, as your behavior informs me is your goal, and at the same time help your parents?" Patricia smiles and says, "Oh, I see what you are saying. I see now, I can stay in school and focus on my responsibilities, like reading under the tree and getting something to eat. I know this is what I want, it is just hard to see my parents worry and work so hard." The counselor responds that her last comment was an indication of social interest, meaning that she cared deeply for others. Patricia agrees: "Yes, I do care, but

I know I have to finish school to try and build a better life for myself. If I can make my life better, then, one day I can help take care of my parents.”

Finally, the school counselor asks Patricia what she knows about work and work–life. Patricia admits that she knows very little. Her mother is a waitress and works crazy hours, and her father works mostly in maintenance. Patricia knows what teachers do but is not really interested in teaching. Patricia has very minimal ideas about the world of work and how she can use her skills to build a career.

Recalling the content of the second ER, the counselor asks again about what she knows about people who care for animals. The counselor and Patricia begin using O*NET and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* to search for careers related to animal care. Patricia starts to learn about many other opportunities to which she had never been exposed or considered in her immediate environment.

* * *

In summary, this fictional case study demonstrates several points. First, early recollections, in the co-construction phase, are a productive way of helping clients talk about and create a career narrative. The collection of ERs engages the student, helping to expose aspects of lifestyle and suggest specific work attitudes and interests. Second, the deconstruction phase allows time for counselor and client to build meaning from the ERs. These personalized aspects of developing meaning can lead to many applications of the client’s strengths and values. Finally, in the third phase, construction, client and counselor work together using many career resources to generate ideas and opportunities. Another aspect of this example also deserves highlighting. Lower-SES adolescents from rural areas may have less career knowledge and fewer career opportunities due to isolation and their parents’ limited exposure. Listening to the manifest content in ERs is one way of helping these students acquire career knowledge so they can learn more about the world of work. The ERs in this case provided not only lifestyle dynamics, values, and attitudes toward life but also an introduction to conversations about Patricia’s specific interests and experiences. By incorporating narrative techniques into career counseling, school counselors can promote positive learning experiences with low-SES children.

Conclusion

Using a narrative career counseling approach in schools with low-SES students has the potential to help them see their future in a more positive light and develop a career identity that will help them succeed in the world

of work. Academic performance outcomes are highly important in public schools, and school counselors are pressured to help students improve their academic performance, leaving little time for the career counseling needs of students at their school. Many high school students have not experienced activities and preparation that highlights the work–life task. This is particularly true for students from low-income families who attend school districts with less revenue and resources. Research has shown that low-SES students need more assistance in developing a career identity because they do not have the resources or opportunities to explore their career identity and discover the various options they have. Adding a narrative approach to current career counseling practices in schools is key to addressing the work–life task and instilling hope and encouragement for the future of economically disadvantaged students.

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