Book Review

Shaping the Story
A guide to facilitating narrative counselling

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This book presents broad explorations on the use of narrative approaches within the domain of career counselling. In doing so, it presents a decisive paradigm shift in this area. This text, which brings together chapters by prominent thinkers and prolific researchers, propels career counselling into a much broader field of life-story narration via narrative counselling. Career Counselling has in the past largely relied on psychometric assessments, which has confined counselors and clients alike. It opens up new spaces for career counselling, expanding its application into exploring life narratives which include the exploration and the development of the self. Career related issues are viewed as part of the self expression and aspirations for life success, no longer is a career outside of the self, but it is engaged with as a profound part of self-expression and hence a key in life success.

The text is very user friendly, and guides the reader and practitioner in the use this approach in various context and for various questions. It illuminates theory, assumptions, and the utilization of narrative counselling techniques within the field of career counselling. The book is permeated with practical and relevant examples which are linked to vignettes from clinical and counselling situations across diverse contexts.

The book is divided into 3 sections. Section 1 covers the theoretical aspects which underpin this paradigm, section 2 discusses practical applications, and section 3 contains the personal narratives of eminent people.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the book and includes a discussion on the possibilities narrative career counselling offers. Chapter 2 discusses narrative counselling with specific reference to the social constructivist school of thinking which has inspired narrative approaches. Chapter 3 foregrounds the hermeneutics within narrative approaches and how personal meaning creation is key within this approach. Chapter 4 borrows from psychoanalytic concepts and links their use to the narrative approach, especially in relation to shifting entrapments and resistances. Chapter 5 makes the link to
the development of the self and identity creation, and the author extend this to the shifts in the identity of the career counselling itself.

Chapter 6 explores the contextual influences on career counselling and engages the reader to resolve the historical tension between positivism and post-modernism. The author cogently argues for post-modernist interpretations within the application of narrative sense making and addresses the tension created by various theoretical stances. Chapter 7 concludes the theoretical section with an exploration of the complexities of multicultural career counselling using storytelling and the construction of the self via the other.

Principles and practical applications are discussed in chapter 8 to 13, discussing techniques, such as using collages, lifelines, journal writing, card-sorting, memory box stories, and applying these in different contexts, illustrating with vignettes and examples. Chapter 14 brings the practical section to an end by introducing an interest inventory which utilizes aspects of traditional assessment and the constructivist narratives approaches. This quantitative-qualitative tool, guides the beginning of a conversation and is especially useful in South African contexts.

The final section contains narratives of famous people. These are poignant, personal and interesting and illustrate the value of personal sense making. It is in this section that I looked for more diverse sources. And this, for me, is the only area which doesn’t quite live up to the exceptional range and depth of the rest of the book. Some of the narratives are slightly self-referential and given the successes of the narrators, making meaning of life choices seems a pleasant luxury. A part of me was saddened by the jarring contrast these narratives present to the jagged careers interrupted by trauma and forces beyond the person’s agency, which are ubiquitous amongst South African narratives.

Despite the gentle critique, this book inspires hope that making meaning is empowering, illuminating and develops the self, especially with regard to career and life choices. The title is deliberately expanding its application and relevance beyond the career counselling context. I regard this text as formative of a paradigm shift in how career narratives can play a significant role in life success. The book significantly contributes to our work with clients who are consciously engaged with making career and life choices and inspires counselors and clients alike.