

## Chapter 3 - Counseling for Work and Relationship: A Practice-Driven Theoretical Approach

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This chapter appears in J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. <http://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch3>

The chapter is based on a paper presented at the conference of the Society of Vocational Psychology, May 16–17, 2016, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL. A video presentation of a preliminary version of this paper may be retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlalZNCJML8&index=5&list=PLCsXiACK-LKrVRKb1z\\_Nw3METZg-SoRFA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlalZNCJML8&index=5&list=PLCsXiACK-LKrVRKb1z_Nw3METZg-SoRFA)

Appreciation is expressed to Emily Bullock-Yowell and Janet Lenz for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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*Keywords:* vocational psychology, narrative, career counseling, intentional process, identity process, career development, career and work

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I have struggled to come to grips with the charge to address the challenges and opportunities for integrating theory, research, and practice with respect to counseling for work and relationship (CWR) (Richardson, 2012b, 2012c; Richardson & Schaeffer, 2013a, 2013b). Central to this struggle is the question of where CWR belongs in relation to these categories, and whether integrating theory, research, and practice is relevant for CWR. A comparison to social cognitive career theory (SCCT), highlighted in this book (Lent, 2017), will help address this question. While flattered that CWR might be considered a theory, it is not a theory in the sense that social cognitive career theory is a theory (Lent, 2017). Rather, CWR is a theoretical approach to practice.

According to Lent (2017), SCCT is a set of theoretical propositions that attempts to first, explain and understand important aspects of human development and behavior that can be empirically validated, and second, apply these understandings (or not) to developing practices that seek to modify these aspects of behavior. Practices so derived are considered theory-driven practices and are highly regarded. In following through on these steps, SCCT is an outstanding example of the traditional empiricist understanding of science, referred to as paradigmatic knowledge by Bruner (1990), by seeking to understand behavior from the stance of an objective observer (Zittoun et al., 2013).

In contrast to SCCT, CWR is different in its logic, values, and scientific tradition, focusing instead on understanding human development and behavior from within the ongoing subjective stream of human experience (Gergen, 2014; Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015; Zittoun et al., 2013). Within this subjective or qualitative tradition, the pragmatic usefulness of theory upstages its truth value (Gergen, in press), and can be viewed primarily through the prism of its relationship to practice. The primary goal of practice is to influence and change behavior, not understand it. A useful theory is one that translates into and helps develop practices that are effective in fostering desired change. Thus, CWR, informed by the subjective or qualitative tradition, is a theoretical approach developed with the goals of practice first and foremost in mind. It is what might be called a practice-driven theoretical approach.

Given the scientific tradition from which CWR emanates, I have taken the liberty of reinterpreting the charge of addressing the issue of integrating theory, research, and practice, an issue perhaps more directly relevant to traditional empiricist science, to consider some interconnections among theory, research, and practice from the perspective of CWR. In the following sections I first describe the goal of practice as it has evolved in CWR before turning to consider CWR as an exemplar of a theoretical approach grounded in narrative theory, one of the major categories of the subjective science of

human development (Gergen, 2014). I then examine three different interpretations of CWR's core narrative principle and their implications for practice. Finally, I discuss the way in which CWR, across all readings of its core narrative principle, is informed by critical discourse analysis, and the implications of this for practice. Implications for research will be considered throughout the paper, and the paper will conclude with a discussion of the most important implication for research from the perspective of CWR, which is how might we begin to assess the effectiveness of counseling practices designed with CWR in mind in relation to CWR's goals.

### **The Goal of Counseling Practice from the Perspective of CWR**

The goal of counseling practice centers around the question: What kind of client change is envisioned by a particular counseling practice? The initial goal of CWR was to help people co-construct their lives through work and relationship. This formulation of the goal is an extension of the rich history of vocational guidance and vocational psychology that initially focused on helping people make vocational choices, then shifted to helping people choose and develop careers, and then, from the perspective of CWR, to helping people co-construct lives through work and relationship. This articulation of this goal was my interpretation, deeply informed by the worldview of contextualism (Lerner, 2006; Pepper, 1942), about how to position desired client change in relation to the radical social changes affecting social worlds, including, but not restricted to, the context of market work. Within this broader rubric, CWR posited two different kinds of work, market work and unpaid care work. Along with relationship, they represent the three major contexts of development.

Revising CWR's goal to helping people co-construct meaningful lives going forward through work and relationship makes two issues more explicit. First, CWR posits that taking agentic action is fundamental in the co-construction of lives in contexts. Taking agentic action is essentially about meaning. It is about doing what a person wants to do on some level: It is about doing what gives meaning to that person's life. An emphasis on lives of meaning as a goal of counseling practice is an important theme in contemporary vocational and organizational psychology (Dik, Byrne, & Steger 2013,

in press; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Rehm, 1999; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Second, by referring to the co-construction of lives going forward, this revised goal explicitly positions CWR in relation to helping people with issues regarding the future dimensions of their lives. Going forward, the practice of helping people co-construct meaningful lives through work and relationship can be referred to as *work and relationship counseling*.

### **Narrative Theory in General**

CWR is grounded in narrative theory, a major development in contemporary social science and in psychology that seeks to understand how people interpret and make sense of their ongoing subjective experience (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986a, 1986b). It is a large, rapidly growing, and multifaceted area. According to Hoshmand (2005), narrative theory can best be considered a set of principles that focuses on the subjective experience of people's lives, especially as narrative, the stories people tell to explain their lives to themselves and others, structures that subjective experience. Basic narrative theory is the belief that narrative is a way of thinking, ubiquitous across cultures, that provides the means for people to organize, process, and make sense of their experience. Hoshmand identifies narrative on a continuum with counseling practice, a practice that also seeks to understand how people, in this case clients, make sense of their lives. As such, narrative is a theory closely akin to counseling. Just as narrative is ubiquitous in people's lives, narrative is ubiquitous in counseling practice.

In light of the similarities between narrative and counseling, it is not surprising that many new and innovative approaches to counseling practice are indebted to narrative theory in the vocational literature (McIlveen, 2012; McIlveen & Patton, 2007, 2010; McMahan & Watson, 2011; Savickas, 2005, 2011, 2012; Young & Popadiuk, 2012). The system's theory framework of career development (Patton & McMahan, 2017) featured in this book is deeply influenced by narrative theory. Thus, CWR is just one approach, among many, that draws on narrative theory.

### **The Core Narrative Principle of CWR: A First Reading Informed by Life Course Theory**

The central narrative principle at the core of CWR is about lives lived in the context of time. People's lives are never static. Time is always moving forward, as are people's lives. It has long been my belief that the centrality of time in lives and, especially, issues about future directions has always been central to, though implicit in, vocational psychology. The issue of time in vocational psychology, especially future time, has been masked to some extent by attention to the kinds of vocational and career choices people make. In my mind, the basic question of "What kind of work am I going to do?" or "What is my career choice?" is, on some level, a question about the future.

The focus on the issue of career choice, or what I refer to as market work, in vocational psychology is an outgrowth of the enormous changes in the nature and complexity of the labor market over the past few centuries, along with the need to help people select among the daunting array of alternatives. In contrast, the notion of choice having to do with other future aspects of life, such as family and relationships, has been more fully structured and scripted by normative expectations about what, how, and when other aspects of life should evolve. In a world of flux and radical change, the describing of lives, the individualization of the life course, and the erosion of normative expectations (Bauman, 2011; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Guichard, 2005), the notion of choice or what to do with a life, not just market work, becomes a central issue for many. It also becomes an issue of concern with which many people need help. This is one reason that CWR takes a holistic perspective regarding how to facilitate or help people co-construct the future story lines of their lives. It is not just that future occupational or market work trajectories may be problematic for many: It is that the basic contours of what constitutes a life have come into question. Within this broader lens, work continues to be central. In fact, in CWR, work is even more central in people's lives than in traditional vocational literature because of the expansion of the meaning of work to include unpaid care.

Narrative theory provides a way to think about how lives evolve over time. The basic narrative principle of CWR, derived from Ricoeur (1980;1984), is that

the story lines of the future emerge from the telling and retelling of the stories of the past, in the present, through action. Central to this churning of narrative is a process of reflexivity in which people revise the directionality of their lives in response to their experiences. For counseling practice, the focus of attention is on agentic action: that is, actions people want to take that may lead to future story lines of lives. Counseling practitioners are not just interested in how story lines of the future emerge: They are interested in helping people co-construct story lines characterized by an inner directionality, a sense that they are helping people pursue lives they want to live. In CWR, the traditional notion in vocational psychology of making a career choice is transformed into taking action and finding some level of inner directionality across major contexts of lives. Furthermore, this process of taking action and co-constructing future story lines characterized by inner directionality is recursive, reflexive, and ongoing as people navigate through ongoing, radical social change.

This central principle of CWR translates easily into counseling practice. It sets forth a basic guideline that counseling practice designed to help people co-construct meaningful lives going forward through work and relationship should focus on facilitating agentic action across the life contexts a person participates in. It is here that life course theory informs counseling practice (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Agentic action is the key. Once identified and emergent in one domain or context of life, agentic action can be fostered in other domains and contexts as both need and opportunity arise. According to life course theory, the multiple trajectories across the major domains and contexts of lives are deeply interconnected and interdependent.

Life course theory also orients CWR to life span issues, recognizing, for example, that the need for agentic action in relation to market work contexts is likely to be most salient for young people transitioning from school to market work, while agentic action in relation to unpaid care work may be more significant at later stages of life. Throughout the lifespan, developing healthy and sustaining relationships is critical for co-constructing lives of meaning. This is the essence of work and relationship counseling.

Opportunities abound to develop a rich narrative research literature that investigates how agentic action and new story lines emerge in lives, a literature that will both inform and be informed by work and relationship counseling. While we have a vast trove of research in vocational psychology on the antecedents of multitude aspects of vocational life, we are likely to find a very different kind of understanding when pursuing these questions using narrative methods. Another topic of interest to vocational psychologists addressed in the narrative research literature is life transitions (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Research by Haynie and Shepherd (2011) on the narratives of a sample of Marines who became disabled in combat going through a career transition process attends to the kind of issues likely to interest counseling practitioners.

At this point, the literature on narrative methods of inquiry provides a rich resource on how to do narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007; Daiute, 2014; Riessman, 2007). Most importantly, narrative research, to the extent that it is attentive to how lives are embedded and evolve in vastly different cultural and social locations, can help to elucidate how and under what conditions individuals can transcend cultural and social constraints. Such findings are of particular significance for work and relationship counseling with respect to issues of social justice.

My work on intentional and identity processes (Richardson, Meade, Rosbruch, Vescio, Price, & Cordera, 2009) illustrates another important area of research inquiry that informs both narrative theory and work and relationship counseling. It is research relevant to understanding the processes of counseling practice based on narrative. For many years, fascinated by the question of how new directions emerge in lives and, especially, how these new directions are socially constructed, my teaching practice has included a component of experiential learning in which students engage in a series of narrative-based group discussions and write short papers about their experience in these groups in which they are encouraged to be reflexive. Reflexivity, in this context, is defined as a process in which a person reflects and reconsiders aspects of his or her self and/or life in response to experience. A research project on one semester of student reflexive papers identified themes that we labeled intentional process and identity process. The conceptualization of intentional process is based

on the notion that intentions frame actions: that is, the broad range of intentional states, including thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and desires regarding aspects of a person's life, provides the subjective frame that enables actions to emerge in relationship to opportunity. Intentional process has to do with thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and desires about where and how a life (or specific aspects of a life) is going. In the narrative data in student papers, we found both revisions and recommitments to intentional states. For example, one student's intentional process might reveal an emerging ambivalence and second thoughts about, heretofore, clear market work goals. Another student's intentional process might indicate increased commitment to a planned course of action. Similarly, identity process data revealed reflexive thinking that either reaffirmed thoughts and feelings about self or considered revisions stimulated by the group discussion. Intentional and identity processes can be considered evidence of the reflexive processing of experience, an important idea in narrative theory having to do with the construction and reconstruction of narrative.

These research findings directly translate into implications for counseling practice. They suggest that the process of facilitating agentic action encompasses the encouragement of the reflexive processing of experience that, in turn, is characterized by intentional and identity process. The identification of this process enables counselors to better conceptualize and more deeply understand the work they are doing with clients. It also enables counselors to reframe progress in counseling to encompass helping clients find some level of inner directionality in their lives and *move along* in how they are thinking and feeling about themselves and their lives. This moving along is fostered by the reflexive examination of their lives and experience of talking about their lives in counseling. These findings resonate with dialogic theory about the self and about counseling (Hermans, 2014; Hermans & Kempen, 1993), especially with the research on dialogic approaches to group counseling for vocational guidance and counseling (Keskinen & Spangar, 2013; Koivuluhta & Puhakka, 2013).

This research also suggests that narrative-based group discussions, combined with reflexive writing, may be particularly helpful to stimulating the reflexive processing of experience and related intentional and identity processes. Group discussions, especially when



informed by a group counseling perspective, provide a rich and stimulating arena for maximizing the potential of the social construction of experience. The use of writing to encourage reflexive thinking and self-development is a significant and innovative practice in vocational guidance (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2013). In this case, the method of research has implications for work and relationship counseling regarding the use of groups and reflexive writing. At the same time, this research informs narrative theory with a more nuanced understanding of how actions related to potential future story lines emerge in the telling and retellings of the stories of the past and what exactly constitutes the reflexive processing of experience.

### **The Core Narrative Principle of CWR: A Second Reading Informed by a Narrative Perspective on Psychotherapy Practice**

The first reading of the core narrative principle of CWR, that the story lines of the future emerge from the telling and retelling of the stories of the past, in the present, through action, addresses its implications for forward movement in lives. The second reading focuses on the telling and retelling of the stories of the past. From the perspective of counseling practice, the statement about the telling and retelling of the stories of the past evokes the practice of psychotherapy. Telling and retelling the stories of the past is an apt description of psychotherapy. In this case, psychotherapy is defined as a practice designed to help people resolve problems and issues that in some way or another are due to experiences located in the past. These past experiences affect present functioning in less than desirable ways.

Although some have noted that psychotherapy practice is essentially about restorying a life (Schafer, 1992; McAdams & Josselson, 2004) and there is even a theory of psychotherapy regarding the reconstruction of problematic past narratives (Angus & McLeod, 2004), Hansen's (2006) postmodern interpretation of counseling and psychotherapy theories takes this understanding of narrative and psychotherapy to a different level. According to Hansen, theories of counseling and psychotherapy are best thought of not as maps of reality, but as meaning structures counselors bring into psychotherapy relationships that enable

people to restory their lives. These meaning structures are fundamentally narrative in nature. They tell a story about how people get into psychological trouble and how to resolve this trouble. Most importantly, it is the restorying of lives in counseling and psychotherapy, enriched by the counseling and psychotherapy theories of the counselor, that heals. Thus, Ricouer's description of a general narrative process is very applicable to the narrative process across theories of counseling and psychotherapy. In this case, narrative can be considered a metatheory of psychotherapy practice.

### **The Core Narrative Principle of CWR: A Third Reading That Integrates Work and Relationship Counseling and Psychotherapy**

The core narrative principle of CWR, which is that the story lines of the future emerge from the telling and retelling of the stories of the past, in the present, through action, can be understood as a critical theoretical link between psychotherapy and CWR, and the foundation for a practice that can be referred to as *counseling/psychotherapy*. It constitutes a third reading of the core principle of CWR. The practice of counseling/psychotherapy encompasses both CWR (the first reading of the core narrative principle of CWR having to do with issues regarding future directions in life) and the broad range of diverse theoretically-based psychotherapy practices (the second reading of the core narrative principle of CWR having to do with issues regarding the past).

This third reading of the core principle of CWR, which knits together the past and the future in the present, suggests that how stories are told about the past influences the kinds of actions that emerge in the present that have implications for the future. For counseling practitioners interested in maximizing the emergence of agentic action, particularly with people who may be having trouble identifying future directions, this connection between past and future suggests that limited or less coherent narratives of the past may impede the emergence of the story lines of the future. Restorying past narratives to enable the resolution of problems rooted in the past may facilitate the emergence of new and more agentic story lines of the future. Similarly, the emergence of new and more agentic story lines of the future may promote the restorying of lives in healing ways. In fact, one school

of psychoanalytic thought proposes that agentic actions that help create meaning in people's lives are the essence and engine of therapeutic change (Summers, 2001, 2005). More importantly, the narrative principle at the heart of CWR makes it possible to begin to think about how to integrate psychotherapy informed by the broad range of counseling and psychotherapy theories with work and relationship counseling.

While the rationale for this proposed integration of the practices of work and relationship counseling and psychotherapy is very rudimentary and speculative at this point, it suggests an approach to practice that does not split past and future. It is a practice in which time is central: It looks both forward and backward in time. In its forward dimension, it is attentive to the current social reality that figuring out future directions is an ongoing task for most people throughout life. In its backward dimension, it is attentive to the fact that many people have, to a greater or lesser extent, problems with living rooted in their past experiences and may need and want to resolve these problems. By not splitting past from future concerns, counseling/psychotherapy also does not split issues that affect inner lives from issues having to do with the social worlds in which people are embedded and through which they need to navigate. Counseling/psychotherapy also does not split normal from abnormal in its acknowledgement that people are integrated wholes who, for any number of reasons, may have trouble from their pasts or trouble with their futures and that both aspects of lives need to be considered together when resolving these troubles.

This discussion of a potential integration of the practices of work and relationship counseling and psychotherapy also suggests a significant research opportunity to inquire about the ways in which past narrative structures might be impeding forward movement in lives: Conversely, it opens up inquiry on how forward movement in lives may help to generate healing narratives of the past. A richly textured discussion of research on how one might proceed to study the ways in which prevailing narratives can constrain forward movement in lives is available in Zittoun et al. (2013).

## Unpaid Care Work: An Exemplar of Critical Discourse Analysis

My proposal for a dual model of work inclusive of market work and unpaid care work (Richardson, 2012b, 2012c; Richardson & Schaeffer, 2013a, 2013b) is an exemplar of critical discourse analysis (Richardson, 2012a; Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012) that examines how work has been separated from care in the historically evolving discourse of work and family. In turn, the discourse of work and family is and has been influenced by prevailing ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism. To talk about discourse is to draw attention to how such ideologies deeply influence language use. The discourse of work and family continues to *disappear* work in personal care settings such as family and other relationship contexts. Although unpaid care work is included as one kind of work in the vocational literature, notably by Blustein (2006; 2013), as long as we continue to think of work, per se, predominantly in relation to paid employment, the power structure of work and family discourse is not disrupted. What is required is language, such as unpaid care work, that specifically pulls unpaid care out of the shadows of domesticity and into the realm of work.

Typically, critical discourse analysis limits itself to a theoretical analysis of the ideologies that shape language use. However, the proposal for a dual model of work moves beyond theoretical analysis to suggest a professional discourse that is, in fact, antithetical to how people think about their lives: that is, in fact, a challenge to prevailing narrative structures. To talk about unpaid care work is a disruptive discourse. Care and work are not supposed to go together. Although a good argument can be made about the adaptive potential for considering unpaid care as work, especially as disruptive technologies are radically altering the nature of and even the possibility of market work for many (Ford, 2015), promoting care as work is essentially a value-laden stance. It is informed by a belief that revaluing care work as central to the lives of both men and women fosters gender equity and, more broadly, is a constituent of the movement towards a more humane and sustainable capitalism (Morris, 2013; Mulgan, 2013). To promote unpaid care as work also locates CWR in the ranks of world-making social science recommended by Gergen (in press) and connects it with early founders of the vocational guidance movement who questioned whether and how the vocational guidance

movement ought to promote progressive change in the world of work (Guichard, 2013; Richardson, 2015), not just prepare people for the world of work.

Whether, and to what extent, the discourse of unpaid care work will affect the practices of work and relationship counseling and counseling/psychotherapy beyond these theoretical papers remains to be seen. I, for one, attentive to language usage in the popular press, note that the term *caregiving* seemed to have a lock on popular discourse until relatively recently. I have begun to see occasional references to the importance of unpaid work and even of unpaid care work in popular discourse, indicating that it may now be more timely to move forward with a dual model of work that encourages people to think of their unpaid care responsibilities as significant and meaningful life and work commitments.

### Conclusion

This journey to consider some interconnections among theory, research, and practice from the perspective of CWR has led to the articulation of two broad approaches to counseling practice, with the first one, work and relationship counseling, embedded in the second one, counseling/psychotherapy. Both approaches are holistic, although counseling/psychotherapy is holistic across more dimensions than CWR. Both also encompass the disruptive discourse of unpaid care work. To conclude this chapter, I briefly address the issue that Fouad (2017) so evocatively discusses in her chapter in this book regarding the critical need to develop a research base that supports the effectiveness of clinical practices. According to Fouad, the future of clinical practice is dependent upon such research. From the perspective of CWR, this is indeed the critical question: Are the practices suggested by CWR effective in helping people accomplish the goals of these practices?

Kazdin (2008) describes two approaches to the task of demonstrating the effectiveness of counseling and psychotherapy interventions. The first is evidence-based treatment in which controlled trials for specific interventions produce results that validate the treatment. The second approach, much more in line with the philosophy of counseling psychology with which vocational psychology is closely aligned (Wampold, 2001), is evidence-based practice that tests

the effectiveness of an intervention or approach to practice in real-life settings that integrate the approach to practice with clinical expertise and clients' specific needs and predilections. Developing the evidence base for the two practices suggested by CWR, work and relationship counseling and counseling/psychotherapy, is the task that lies ahead.

Although this is a daunting challenge, several steps come to mind, inspired by Reid and West's (2011) research on narrative in career guidance. They worked with a group of collaborating practitioners to first, train them in narrative methods based on Savickas's model (2011) and then, to evaluate the methods for career guidance in real-life practice settings. Similarly, the broad and holistic approaches to practice suggested by CWR need to be more fully developed as models for practice and implemented by counselors in the field with diverse kinds of clients in diverse settings. At the same time, the evaluation of these practices needs to examine how, to what extent, and with whom these practices are helpful based on assessments geared toward the goals of these practices. In so doing, the traditional commitments of practitioners to training and supervision will be enriched by an evaluative dimension. What is most important is that the development and evaluation of the clinical practices of work and relationship counseling and counseling/psychotherapy proceed with practice development shaped by research, and research, in turn, shaped by clinical practice.

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