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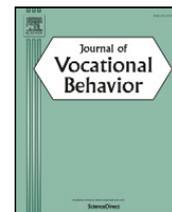
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## “Telling tales”: Using narrative in career guidance

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## ABSTRACT

In this article the authors argue for the importance of narrative-based approaches in career guidance work in an uncertain, unpredictable world. This requires a paradigmatic shift in thinking that can be too difficult, at present, for some practitioners. The article reports on the first phase of a collaborative project with a group of practitioners – working in guidance in schools and with young people in public access points – to develop and evaluate narrative methods. Our analysis highlights the usefulness of the approach, but also reveals tensions derived from the working cultures of career guidance practitioners.

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## 1. Introduction

The research project described in this article is to be located in the wider context of developments in career and educational guidance theory and practice. It is important to acknowledge that many established approaches associated with career and educational counseling and guidance have been developed in North America. These approaches, and associated theories, tend, primarily, to be rooted within the discipline of psychology. But in the recent narrative turn (in North America and elsewhere, as well as in other communities of practice, such as therapy and health care), greater attention is being paid to interdisciplinary and wider cultural forms of understanding – requiring, for instance, awareness of the person's historical and socio-cultural context as well as their “psychology” (Merrill & West, 2009).

Within the UK, career guidance has been informed by an eclectic use of theory from a range of social science disciplines, but this apparent interdisciplinarity can be loosely structured and it requires some interrogation. Research suggests that trait-and-factor (or scientific matching) approaches are still the most common technique used in guidance interviews in the UK (Bimrose, 2010). Collin (2009) notes that, “As knowledge has become more detailed in response to an increasingly complex world, the ideals of a unified science – the synthesis and integration of knowledge... have become undermined” (p.102). The call for interdisciplinary collaboration and an examination of what this term means, is evident in a range of social disciplines, but has received insufficient attention in vocational psychology (Collin, 2009). It should be noted, in the context of the present study, that the work involves an interdisciplinary collaboration: between a researcher who has employed psychosocial approaches, combined with biographical narrative interviews, in the analysis of learning, change and transitional processes across the life course (combining psychoanalytic object relations theory with socio-cultural levels of analysis, building bipolar accounts); and a researcher/academic, who combines sociology with career guidance theory. The study itself also involves collaboration with practitioners and their clients, recognizing the importance of grounding the study, and theory building, in the lived experience of actual, everyday encounters, in all their messy complexity.

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Such an interdisciplinary imperative is influenced by a tradition – reaching back to the Chicago School of Sociology and C. Wright Mills – of focusing on the interplay of history and biography, structuring processes and individual agency in lives, as well as locating many personal troubles in the context of public issues (Wright Mills, 1959 and 1970; Merrill & West, 2009). To address the challenges of interdisciplinary work, Collin (2009) advocates that collaborators should address the differences that arise from their distinct frames of reference; in terms of knowledge base, concepts, language use, practice, epistemology and so on. Such a struggle lies at the heart of our article.

Attention also needs to be paid, from the outset, to language and context, not least because terms and their usage vary across cultures and contexts. Using the term “client” has connotations of power, denoting an expert position for the practitioner and placing the individual coming for guidance or counseling in a dependent position. In the project the practitioners work with young people, so, in general, this term will be used as an acceptable alternative; although the discussion need not be restricted to the issues that young people encounter. The terms career and educational counseling and/or guidance can carry different connotations across and within different countries, but, mindful of the differences, they are used interchangeably in the text. The term career counselor tends, in the United Kingdom, not to be used, in public settings, as against the term adviser or more commonly practitioner. Within the context for career guidance, there are constant changes affecting such work in the UK, as documented elsewhere (Watts, 2010; Colley et al., 2010). Some of these are proving very difficult for practitioners – including evidence from major research studies (Colley et al., 2010) that the development of integrated support services for young people may have weakened career guidance provision and affected the morale of many practitioners. There have been frequent calls for a more coherent service in England (where the service is different from the other countries within the UK) as part of a government review (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006). Note should be made of many years of structural reorganization, including the privatization of many guidance services for young people, followed, more recently, by their reintegration into local authority services, alongside the development of a new ‘Adult Guidance Service’ (Watts, 2010). A sense of uncertainty is well understood by guidance services throughout England as, among some, is the pervasiveness of highly instrumentalist, deprofessionalising agendas and the weakening of expertise (Reid & West, 2008; Colley et al., 2010). These processes lie at the heart of the many aspects of our study.

## 2. Turning to narrative and biographical approaches

Present times can appear deeply paradoxical, offering, however illusorily, many more opportunities for self-experiment alongside unprecedented change and uncertainty, at both an economic but also a cultural level. There are profound discontinuities in the world of work, including deindustrialization in many older industrial areas of Western economies. The nature of some of these rapid changes derives from globalization and the impact of technology. At the personal level, a reflexive project of self – a perpetual working and reworking of identity – has been seen as a kind of survival necessity (Giddens, 1991; Frosh, 1991; Hunt & West, 2006, 2009). There are major shifts in the organization of work (Richardson, 2009), while the social realities of people's lives find expression in the changing roles of women, in job insecurity and deregulation, migration and immigration as well as in an ageing population. Career and educational choices have also to be located within an ideological climate in which people tend to be held more individually responsible for their predicament. This is especially the case for adults, and young people on the verge of adulthood, living in communities deeply affected by economic change – particularly in the current recession. Levitas (1998), for instance, had chronicled a shift in discourse, over two decades and more, reflecting and constituting a neo-liberal agenda. The shift in the United Kingdom, but also more widely, involves a move from a welfare state, social democratic, redistributive discourse – RED – to a social inclusion discourse (SID), primarily focused on getting people into work. More recently a moral underclass discourse (MUD), has become pervasive, in which people are held more individually responsible for problems and solutions. MUD can stick: the pressure to enter the labour market or education and training at all costs, whatever the quality or suitability, has increased. The career guidance community in the UK is caught up in such a world where service contracts and funding pressures require young people described as NEET (not in education, employment or training) to become EET (IN employment, education and training) ASAP (as soon as possible). Numerical “engagement” targets become the dictum for service funding and sustainability. There can be scepticism about the possibility of meaningful client-centeredness in this climate: best get on with what can be done, in realistic ways. On the other hand many practitioners are deeply concerned about the constraints of such work and the inadequacy of “quick fix” responses to the complex requirements of young people (Colley et al., 2010).

Within such changing socio-cultural and economic realities and the constantly shifting terrain for career and educational guidance in the UK, a phrase often heard is – “What we need is a new model for career guidance”. The reasoning behind the desire for a new model may partly relate to changes to the work of career guidance practitioners in the UK and perceived faults and constraints in ways of working with young people; alongside the experience of deprofessionalization. It may in part be reactive but also proactive (Colley et al., 2010; West, 2009a,b). This article is a contribution to the debate about what should inform rethinking. However it is counter intuitive to say on the one hand, that practitioners' work and client base is now diverse and on the other, that the answer for managing this diversity is to devise **one** new model. Clarity is needed about what is being rejected in the call for something new. When requiring “a new model”, will this encompass a theoretical base that is used to understand how individuals make decisions or is it a request for reframing the way interventions are made?

Of course, it is difficult to separate the two. Part of the imperative may relate to the continuing pervasiveness of trait/factor “matching theory”, at least in the United Kingdom, devised at the beginning of the 20th century. This is clearly narrow, limiting and pays little attention to the importance of relationships in a decision-making process. At the same time a three-stage model for framing the work is also used widely in the UK (e.g. Egan, 2007), and is based on a more integrated approach to theory and can support a range of techniques. What may be needed is not **one** new model but a range (new and old) to be used according to the

needs of the young person: in other words what fits best for them, not the adviser or the organization. If understanding the young person's perspective and the meanings they construct about themselves, their world and their place in the world of education, training and work is the key to effective career/life planning — then practice needs to move beyond simplistic solutions to what are complex, situated “life” decisions, to which narrative approaches can provide more fulsome access (Reid, 2009).

Building new, flexible, and less reductionist models is easier said than done. Within counseling the selective mining of approaches that have varying philosophical and theoretical backgrounds is seen as dangerous (McLeod, 1997) — bringing to mind the adage “Jack of all trades and master of none”. The result can be a superficial understanding of the approach and the practitioner can get lost when unexpected issues emerge and the knowledge of what to do next is missing (Reid, 2008). However guidance in the UK is not therapeutic counseling per se (albeit it can have therapeutic effects) and practitioners will be aware of boundaries within their work and the limits of their own expertise. The ability to contain troubling material and to offer a referral is a normal practice for many practitioners; not just those advisers working in the context of intensive youth support or school counseling. Furthermore a purist approach requires a seismic shift in career guidance practice that is unlikely to be achieved: better perhaps to work collaboratively with those “at the sharp end” in order to develop and incorporate new ideas into practice, albeit in a potentially piecemeal way.

Narrative approaches are, as noted, proving influential in a number of different professional communities of practice: including psychotherapy, family counseling, medicine, education, health care as well as research (West, 2001; Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998; Dominicé, 2000; Launer, 2005; White & Epston, 1990; Merrill & West, 2009), and school counseling (Winslade & Monk, 2007). There are clear connections between career counseling, career construction theory and the above. For example, Savickas (2005) is concerned with how individuals understand and develop career behaviour through personal meanings, which are highly influenced, if not determined, by social values. The meanings that individuals bring to career behaviour and career and educational decision making, are shaped by their biographies and socio-cultural locations. In that sense “reality” is a construction based on experience and cultural influences, as well as the narrative resources available in particular sub-cultural contexts; whether defined by class, ethnicity, gender, poverty and so on. Thus as Savickas (2009) when making choices about working lives, attention needs to be paid to biography, “private logic” (p.187) and life goals, not just occupational choice. An approach is needed that is interactive, has a focus on the holistic and meaning, and considers context, past, present and future.

Foregrounding personal meaning, within a cultural frame, and giving this greater importance in processes of vocational and educational decision making, is the key to understanding narrative career counseling. A more “objective” approach (e.g. trait/factor matching) may have its place, once, that is, the individual has the opportunity to be involved in an active process of developing and interpreting a life “story”, as part of considering a life future. The exploration will be subjective, but life as lived is subjective (Savickas, 2006). What is produced is not a factual truth but a narrative truth, meaningful to the individual in terms of experience, understanding of the world and of possibilities within it (West, 1996). The career goal or vocational action that is taken as a result of a narrative exploration is more likely, it is argued, to be motivational (Valach & Young, 2002), meaningful, and sustainable. However, we also recognize that a discourse of client-centeredness and narrative meaning is problematic: the stories people tell, for instance, can reflect dominant narratives in the wider culture rather than simply the “voice” of clients (West, 1996). The stories we all tell about ourselves and our perception of the world cannot be separated from the powerful discourses that form the background to our lives. Yet, paradoxically, this may underline the need for more spaces and procedures by which our stories can be thought about, including the influences that pervade them.

Clearly if the “story” — past, present and future — is central to this process of meaning-making, then practitioners need to pay due attention to listening skills and the need for attentiveness and time. The latter is increasingly seen — from diverse perspectives such as cultural anthropology and psychoanalytic object relations theory — to be crucial in engaging with another in ways that can be meaningful and agentic (Crawford, 2005; West, 2009a,b). It encompasses the auto/biographical resonance or counter-transference effect of an individual's story — its emotional as well as cognitive impact on the practitioner, as one life connects with another — which can offer potential insights for the practitioner. This is more than empathic questioning: it is listening and attentiveness, including the practitioner's own feelings and thoughts. It also values the individual's understanding of the meaning of events, and how they interpret the impact on the action they take or are able to take. It requires the practitioner to be curious and respectful, open, anti-oppressive as well as reflexive and self-aware. It requires the practitioner to slow down, to take time, to be in the moment — often difficult in what is often referred to as “busy practice” (Meekums, 2008). But ‘busy-ness’ characterizes diverse professional contexts, and there may be ways of managing this, and taking more time, however difficult, as illuminated by in-depth narrative researches among family doctors and other professionals such as teachers (West, 2001, 2009a).

On this theme, Hansen and Amundson (2009) recognize the difficulty when they ask for a more spiritual and moral approach to career counseling. Drawing on what is referred to as “philosophical counseling” (p. 32) they argue for “felt presence”, and not rushing to solutions that close down the opportunity for a more meaningful engagement: “One of the potential outcomes of frantic activity and busy-ness is that we can lose our ability to be creative and to think outside the box” (p. 34). As an example of a deeply reflexive approach to career counseling that is truly centered on the “client”, they write about “stillness, openness and undoing” (p.34), as is evident in the following reflection on the counseling process:

A session filled with activity needs to be tempered with a willingness to just “be” in the situation. Certainly this involves periods of silence, but it is more than just sitting quietly. At the most fundamental level it means that I need to have a sense of patience, self-assurance and confidence that the activities will be helpful if I just stay with them. This process proceeds at its own pace (often slower than I would like) and it is important that I don't try to force the situation.

(Hansen & Amundson, 2009 p.33).

The antecedents at work here are of course many and varied. There is a link back to the poet Keats' notion of negative capability, meaning the capacity of being in and with uncertainties without any irritable and premature reaching after certainties and facts, a notion and way of being that gets lost in many frenetic environments (Harris Williams, 2005; West, 2009a).

An often cited barrier to trying a new approach is the time constraints experienced in current practice and the tensions created by working in an instrumental, busy environment where targets have to be met. How can practitioners resist the busy-ness, especially when it is experienced as imposed and inevitable? There is a tension here for practitioners when the time available for work with young people precludes a meaningful, reflective space for constructing ideas about career for both the practitioner and the young person, and where there does not appear to be a “safe”, transitional space to work on such issues, in the language of Winnicott (1971). (See later discussion).

Even when time and space is available, it is still difficult to move from an existing and comfortable “way of doing things” to a new approach that can be challenging for the practitioner; reminding them of the insecurities experienced when in initial training. However, career guidance practitioners in the UK (and elsewhere) espouse that the work is client-centered, so perhaps these discomforts need to be experienced in order to reconsider and engage in more meaningful and ethical practice.

Before moving on to discuss the project in detail, there is a need for a further note about stories and the phrase “telling tales”, which we use in our title. Stories have the power to shape experience and the stories we tell about ourselves count for something: they are, in that sense, “telling tales” (in career terms a teller is someone who counts or keeps a tally of money or goods). However, the phrase “telling tales” can also suggest that tales may be regarded as suspect versions of the truth, evoking the picture of a child being “told off” for telling untruths, or being a “tell tale”. But, the story that the person is asked to *re-call* in the context of a career guidance interview, is not merely a factual report of a childhood memory, but is a *re-interpretation*. Stories live on in the present – shaping the teller's experience. In this way, the teller has begun to construct a present reality out of past events. Used within a career guidance context, the analysis of stories is not normally the main focus. Yet, it is as the stories are told *out loud* that a sense of continuity develops about who a person is and how, at this turning point, a decision can relate to the continuity of a life theme. There is another underlying meaning that some stories are more “telling” than others and that people often come to career guidance not expecting their stories to be valued. Indeed many young people arrive with stories (labels – sometimes internalized) that have been projected on to them by those who possess the power to define them in terms of their “problems” rather than their interests (Winslade & Monk, 2007). The point of storytelling is to engage the person in a kind of reflexive play, to encourage them to reflect at a deeper level and enable them to gain greater self-awareness in a search for a meaningful career/life identity.

### 3. The model used in the project

So in progressing from theory to practice, the task for the project was to consider how a practitioner might move towards assisting the person to “tell their story”, to the point where both can identify patterns and life themes within the story, and then to translate this into some clearer sense of career possibility. Of course, when an individual is encouraged to “tell their story”, they do not progress through a sequence of facts; they talk about events. These events are related; they are episodes that form patterns, which represent the individual's socially constructed view of themselves in the world (Reid, 2006). Patterns can sometimes be easier to see than themes and easier to talk about with the individual at the exploration stage of the interview: the former appears more illustrative and tentative whilst the latter may sound more literal and constant. In other words an exploration of patterns can be a starting point to identify life themes.

In relation to narrative counseling, McLeod (1997) notes that there is no comprehensive handbook on how to do this – there is a need for flexibility and creativity rather than formulae. Within career counseling there are those who offer practical suggestions that can help practitioners to incorporate narrative methods within their work – specifically, Savickas (1997, 2009), Cochran (1997) and Peavy (2000). In considering a number of approaches, the project group – eight career guidance practitioners and the two researchers – decided to trial the use of the Savickas narrative career counseling model. Seven of the eight practitioners work for a public guidance service working with young people up to the age of 19 in a region in South East England, the remaining practitioner worked in a university. We began the project by providing what might be called a safe “transitional space” (Merrill & West, 2009), away from the work place, to explore the Savickas (2005, 2006).

Winnicott developed the notion of transitional space in relationships between people. He was interested in the infant's struggle to separate from a prime caregiver and what made this possible, in psychologically healthy ways. He was to apply the idea to processes of self negotiation in adult life: what enabled people to move from dependency and defensiveness towards greater openness to experience and creative forms of endeavour; from relatively insecure to more confident forms of attachment (Winnicott, 1971). Spaces might take many and varied forms, such as being at university or engaging in a guidance interview. Significant others, and their responses, are seen to be important in re-evaluating self and possibility and in overcoming anxieties about whether the space was for the likes of them. A person could come to think and feel differently towards self, “reality” and future possibilities because of the capacity of significant others (like a teacher or other respected professional) to contain anxiety, to encourage and challenge in ways that legitimised risk taking.

Use was made in the transitional space represented by the project for readings, a DVD example, role-play and recorded discussion. Practitioners experimented using the approach in practice with a variety of young people and we met again to discuss that experience. Alongside this, in a third meeting, practitioners provided audio-recorded examples of using the approach (which were later transcribed) and made their own feedback notes. The Savickas narrative approach was then incorporated into a broad three-stage model. Its adapted use is outlined in Fig. 1.

#### 4. The analysis of interviews with young people

Ten interviews with young people were fully transcribed and analyzed, using a proforma developed in other in-depth work with learners, professionals and their clients (Merrill & West, 2009). The proformas were combined with practitioners' reflective notes, which enabled us to identify those aspects of the model that worked well and areas that needed further thought and

*Beginnings – negotiating a contract.*

Questioning: How can I be useful?

Asking: Tell me why is this important now?

Explaining: Format, number of meetings, note taking and so on

Identifying: Topics and related issues

Agreeing: Aspects of confidentiality, how to proceed – an agenda.

*Middles - exploring the story.*

The task is to create a space where the person can “play” with ideas: to move beyond their expectations of what “an interview” should be. This can be both surprising and challenging for the individual, and the practitioner will need to be persistent and not “give up” too quickly. As always, genuineness and honesty are important; e.g. “The reason I asked that question is ...” or “What we could try here is... it may help us to think about... how would you feel about trying that?”. It is at this second “stage” that Savickas’ six favourite questions are used:

Role models (3) when young (these can be a “real” person or a character from a book, TV show, cartoon)

Magazines / TV shows (favourites, ones that are looked at regularly)

Hobbies / interests (e.g. “What do you like to do in your free time?”)

Books – all time favourites (could be films or other entertainment media)

Favourite saying/motto (best describes an approach to life), could be a t shirt message or a “tag”

Favourite school subjects / and those disliked.

The exploration continues by visiting stories from childhood. Savickas suggests the stories selected reflect the current dilemma that brings a person to career counselling at this “turning point” – it reflects their *pre-occupations* in both senses of the word (Savickas, 2005, 2006); past in present and present in the past. These are the *telling* stories, meaningful (rather than factual) at the present time. The stories *rehearse* the problem and can lead to insight and potential solutions. Questions focus on:

Identifying the 1st significant story – what happened next (getting the detail)?

Asking for two more stories – if the person is really stuck it **may** be helpful to prompt, e.g. “How about

Fig. 1. The Savickas narrative career counseling model (our adaptation).

when you were in primary school... when you moved up into secondary school?" It is also important that they know the story is not being judged; they do not *recount* a story to impress the listener

Summarising the essence of the stories by turning them into headlines for a newspaper (the client does this)

Listening for the first verb – the first things they say

Summarising the stories – and feeding back actual words and working with the person to identify patterns and potential themes

Relating these to the presenting issue at the start of the conversation

Working at joint identification of the life interests

Relating these to future education, training and/or career goals.

*Endings* - Having identified the goals, there is agreement on what action is required:

Identifying potential action

Evaluating potential action

Clarifying the action steps

Checking /asking – “So, what has been achieved today?” related to the initial “How can I be useful question?”

Savickas states that there needs to be a period of reflection after the meeting where the client has an opportunity to test the ideas. It is in the follow up meeting (may not be face-to-face) that “reality checking” takes place – shaped by subsequent reflection and the experience of the action taken. Follow-up questions could include:

What did we get wrong?

What are your reflections on the discussion and the initial action?

What are the goals now – are these the same or different?

What further action is required?

How will that be reviewed?

What else needs to happen?

Fig. 1 (continued).

adaptation. A significant difference between the approach, as used by Savickas in the USA and the application of the approach within the UK guidance sector, is how our practitioners worked with young people on the identification of the themes from the six favourite questions and the stories. This is now discussed further. In considering aspects that proved useful in the “new” approach, practitioners liked the systematic structure that the Savickas model provided for interviewing. At the beginning of the interview they sought permission to “try something different”, which helped with the engagement of the young person from the outset. The most effective interviews were those where the practitioner explained what they were doing and why they were asking certain

questions. This aided the sense of collaboration – both practitioner and young person were trying something new together. Using the opening line taken from Savickas – “How can I be useful today?” – helped to set the scene in terms of a collaborative approach, away from the more usual “How can I help you?” (The latter suggesting, perhaps, more of a conventional “expert” intervention).

It was important to avoid a “check list” approach to structure which can lead to a rather superficial exploration; although in part this may be inevitable when trying a new method. Initially, there was a tendency for some practitioners to “name the event” and then move on, which did not lead to any meaningful exploration. Whereas staying with the story and asking follow up questions opened up an opportunity for the client to think at a deeper level, as well as increasing confidence and rapport; in short, reflexivity. Being listened to in such a way inspired participation from some shy, reluctant and or withdrawn young people and more considered engagement from others. However, note should be made that even the most apparently open-ended approach can be used mechanistically.

The practitioners did modify their language to fit better with the client group; for example, the motto did not work well, on occasions, but a t-shirt message or tag did. One practitioner did introduce this question to good effect by exploring the family context and asked, “If the family motto were written up over the fireplace what would it say?” (Reid & Scott, 2010). A concern at the start of the project was how to deal with any difficult stories that might emerge – boundary issues in short – but, as in any career and educational guidance interview, it remains possible to listen and contain these while staying within the boundaries of a career guidance interview (rather than therapeutic counseling). But this is problematic, as explored in other contexts (Hunt & West, 2006, 2009). Where the young person did speak about a sad event, the practitioner felt that they chose to tell of this and wanted to be heard, and the practitioner felt secure enough to contain any anxiety and to live, for a while, in negative capability.

The other significant issue was how to approach the identification of the themes in the discussion. When watching the Savickas DVD, practitioners were uneasy about this aspect of the model. Similarly when working with students studying for a career guidance qualification in the UK, they also felt anxious about this element. Training in the UK leads practitioners to avoid taking on a “directive” role. It is clear in the discussion of the model on the DVD that the identification of the life themes arose from reflecting back the words that the client used. In spite of this our practitioners and students perceived this as “telling the client”, affirming but rather directive, and they thought this may be a cultural difference, where “British diffidence” was affecting their reaction to this part of the interview. So, whilst some practitioners liked the very positive feel to the interview, others were concerned about the perceived level of intervention taken by the practitioner in the DVD example. This was expressed as not seeing themselves as “expert enough” to lead on the identification of the themes in such a way and not viewing themselves as “counselors”. Three points need to be made in relation to this: firstly Savickas is clear that it is the client's words and phrases that are fed-back and that an analysis is not the aim; secondly, there are assumptions about a “British” style of interviewing being made and finally, the boundaries between guidance and counseling are not clear cut. However, these perceptions are meaningful to those involved and point to the importance of understanding the intersections between the theoretical, historical, cultural and biographical traditions for career guidance in different contexts; even where the language is shared, “meanings” can vary and new models need to be adapted accordingly.

So how did practitioners approach the identification of themes from the questions and the stories? The solution was to use questions that facilitated the client to recognize patterns and to lead on the identification of potential themes. Some felt that this was more by luck than design: one said, “I didn't know what to do next, so asked the young person what they thought!” What worked particularly well was preceding this phase with an explanatory introduction; for example, “The theory goes that the stories that come to your mind are connected to the decisions that you are trying to make”. This links to the concept of exploring their *pre-occupations*, indeed one practitioner used the Savickas concept of *rehearsing the problem* in their introduction to this phase of the interview. Following a summary, other examples used with good effects were: “So, where has that discussion got us to?”, “What is your thinking now?”, “What clues have emerged, do you think?”

A point where the interview switches from storytelling to life theme identification is when the client is asked to summarise the stories by providing headlines for a newspaper. Savickas (2006) states with some emphasis, that this is the turning point when the client begins the interpretation by encapsulating their life themes in the headlines. Practitioners paid particular attention to the words used, wrote them down and noted any emphasis for the feedback in the later discussion.

A further point from the analysis was the need for persistence from the practitioner – the method requires the young person to work in a different way to that which they might be expecting from a career guidance interview. For example, identifying role models (up to three) can involve using silence and giving the young person space to think; at the same time as demonstrating acceptance and trust so that they can be open and honest about their ideas – knowing they are not being judged. It can be easy to impose the practitioner's knowledge of the role model if they are a known person or character, or if they cannot easily cope with silence. The practitioner then needs to concentrate on what it is about the role model – their qualities – that the young person finds admirable. It is important to clarify that role models should be outside of the family (as we do not chose our family), but can include TV characters for instance.

Another point to emphasise in facilitating storytelling was to assure the young person that this was not “tell me about your childhood”, but “tell me about the first story that you think of”: otherwise they can search for a “good” story to please the listener or put them in a “good light”. Such processes can be largely unconscious. And to clarify, practitioners decided where and with whom they would use the approach, guided by their assessment of the model's usefulness for particular clients (mainly young people in schools, but also in public access points). In other words, this was not their only approach, but one amongst others, within an integrated approach to practice. Within our practitioners' case load, clients may also be self referred (as in the Savickas DVD example), from age 14–19 (and up to 25 if they have additional educational needs). The example viewed on the Savickas DVD is the first of at least two interactions. The second, follow up meeting, is the “reality check” and action planning stage. Here lies another tension for career guidance in the UK, as the normal time allowance would be for one interview of around 40–50 min

(sometimes as short as a 30 min diagnostic interview). A follow up interview may take place but could be several weeks later. The exception to this is when the young person is viewed as requiring additional or “intensive” help due to a number of issues that may lead them into the NEET category discussed earlier.

Flexibility then seems the key for effective and relevant practice: the point of using any model is to get the individual to engage in the process in a way that is meaningful for them. As a career guidance student said recently, “Can you imagine what would happen if the whole of year 11 [age 15–16] thought this is what always happens in a careers interview – they’d tell each other and all come with prepared stories!” Most practitioners in the project used the approach where they felt the young person was stuck at a transition point and needed a different approach in order to achieve a deeper exploration of their interests.

Within the project, practitioners used the entire model but found some aspects more useful than others, according to what proved insightful. For some, this might have been exploring role models or the motto, for others illumination came from the stories told. It may be the case that enough is achieved using the six favourite questions without the need for the deeper exploration provided by the stories. One practitioner stated, “If I took nothing else away from this project, just changing my opening line to “How can I be useful today” has made a real change to my practice – it completely changes the nature of the interview and the relationship with the young person”. Our ethos in this project was to develop collaboration between researchers and practitioners and practitioners and their clients. Building trust and rapport is essential in any intervention, but particularly when trying a different and “unexpected” approach. Many of our practitioners work with young people whose answer to questions about themselves and ideas in relation to interests and “decision making” is likely to be “dunno”: they probably do know, but do not trust the practitioner enough to tell them. An approach that demonstrates genuine interest in the young person, whilst investing time in respectful listening to their views on what is important and meaningful for them, is, it is argued, more likely to be “useful” for that young person and satisfying for the practitioner.

As part of the evaluation, feedback from practitioners who recorded interviews and, importantly, young people has been positive. Practitioners' comments included:

- A powerful way to get young people to think in deep and unexpected ways
- Gets to the root of the indecision and leads to more positive outcomes
- The young person was transformed when he started talking about his achievements in early childhood – now starting to make positive comments about himself
- Even when the childhood story was quite painful or negative, it worked well because they were in control – this is the story the young person had chosen to tell and they put their own interpretation on it.

And young people said:

- That was interesting – I wasn't expecting that!
- I thought it was fantastic!
- Yes definitely useful, given me lots to think about – opened my eyes quite a lot actually and made me think more, rather than making rash decisions
- Wow, I've never thought of that before – and **it all came from me!**

##### **5. Moving from young people's stories to practitioners' stories – exploring the auto/biographical resonances in the work**

What became clear as the project developed was that some practitioners were more comfortable using the approach than others. For some it was difficult to find the time, space and confidence to apply a new approach, which highlighted the need for a safe transitional space within “busy practice”, away from project meetings. It is not the case that a new approach necessarily takes more time per interview (45 min to an hour was the preference), but it does require more thinking time. As part of the analysis phase we (the researchers) recorded a dialogue in which we considered the themes in the transcripts and the possible impact and constraints felt by practitioners in using this new approach. Of the eight practitioners, one joined the group because of an interest derived from a taught module on biographical narrative methods in a Masters programme. She was not trained as a career guidance professional. For her, an underpinning understanding of guidance and counseling principles were, unsurprisingly, not evident in the work, but this provided a useful contrast to the experience of trained professionals. Of the remaining seven practitioners, three withdrew subsequently due to pressure of work: although there are perhaps other reasons related to using a new method which we want to explore further. The remaining four practitioners continued to use the model or parts of it; some more so than others and not all the time. Interviews have now been undertaken with these practitioners to illuminate and interrogate the auto/biographical resonance of the work, in order to evaluate further the usefulness of the approach as well as to think more broadly about wider training policy.

Of course, alongside exploring the resonance for practitioners it is also important to examine the significance of the work for the two researchers. Our backgrounds are different, which created interesting tensions in the work and in writing about it. For example Linden is a trained psychoanalytical psychotherapist and sees issues in the interview material that Hazel – trained as a career practitioner – would recognize but not explore in the context of career guidance. The issue of boundaries here is obvious, but also points to a question about the extent to which a model based in counseling can be used within career and educational guidance in the UK, in a context of instrumentalization and, arguably, some deprofessionalization. The next phase of the research presents a challenge, in these terms: specifically when working with auto/biographical resonance and how such insights and approaches may inform wider policies in the training of career guidance workers. In short, are we espousing an approach that is

<b>Narrative / story</b>	<b>Targets and Outcomes</b>
<b>Meaning and identity</b>	<b>Behaviourism and focus</b>
<b>Constructivist</b>	<b>Realist</b>
<b>Slow time / play</b>	<b>Fast time / seriousness</b>
<b>Emotions / empathy</b>	<b>Cognition / logic</b>
<b>Auto / biography</b>	<b>Objective distance</b>
<b>Opening up space for creativity</b>	<b>Instrumental – ‘what works already’</b>

Fig. 2. Auto/biographical positioning within the project (Reid & West, 2008).

too difficult to implement in contemporary practice in the UK? Or does this avoid facing difficult questions about the nature and role of career guidance – and of professional training – in the contemporary working world?

A framework for considering how the individual practitioner/researcher positions her/himself (or is positioned by their working context) is outlined in Fig. 2. This is not intended to be an either/or positioning, or necessarily to view one side of the figure as more valuable than the other; although the underpinning rationale of the project is clearly located to the left rather than the right. A point on a spectrum between each opposing category would be a better way of viewing where the individual may be positioned in relation to each pairing. We think this may be a useful device for our thinking in relation to the auto/biographical significance of the work on both a professional and personal level for all those involved in the project. The results of that thinking will be disseminated in a second article.

For the next phase of the project, we will draw on the work of Merrill and West (2009) and Dominicé (2000) to explore and interrogate the value of auto/biographical narrative methods in social research and professional practice. On completion and evaluation of both phases of this pilot study, we plan to disseminate the work further via a more extensive project.

## 6. Conclusion

The ongoing dissemination will not lead to recommendations for one new model for the UK to replace existing approaches, yet it can provide examples of what worked in a number of cases, and what did not, and suggest why. Narrative approaches may be seen as part of a wider epistemological and methodological movement that, genuinely, seeks to value people and their stories as well as the importance of dialogues in professional interactions. Furthermore, learning from emotional experience, and from auto/biographical processes more widely, can be a powerful tool for managing and enhancing working lives as well as the experiences

of service users (Dominicé, 2000; Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Apitzsch, 2004; West, 2009a,b; Hunt & West, 2006). This is why we are engaging with the work, mindful as we are that such aspects – however central to desirable professional and public service development – easily get lost or diminished in a culture of targets within an income-driven climate. Thus, if there is a narrative turn in some professional practice, it is easily frustrated. If the career guidance community in the UK and elsewhere is serious about wanting to develop new models for career and educational guidance practice, time is needed to invest in building a safe and structured development space, as in this project. Our project has offered one such space to build a new sense of shared purpose and professional possibility, within a more meaningful context for career and educational guidance interventions – in short, for some ‘telling’ tales to emerge. But the process, as the stories suggest, is not without difficulty.

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