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## The Concept of Role Models in Life Design

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### Abstract

The 21st century brings challenges for advancing career counseling and vocational psychology on a global level. The globalization of career work called for innovations in theory as well as interventions, techniques, and concepts. The emergence of life design with its emphasis on self-making, identity shaping and career-construction provides not only useful theory, intervention and technique but the powerful theoretical concept of role models. Career construction counseling and the Career Story Interview provide a context for exploration of the influence of role models on the construction of both self and career. The efficiency and comprehensive nature of the career construction process answers the call for cost-effective, useful interventions required for advancing career counseling and vocational psychology across cultures as a global endeavor.

Keywords: Career, career counseling, career construction, life design, role models;

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### 1. Introduction

The 21st century ushered in a transformative era for career theory and practice. The future awaiting career theorists and practitioners alike was labeled as “vuca”, that is volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous. The future had arrived and career counseling would be expected to recognize and meet demands of this perplexing new terrain. During the first decade of the new century, the future of career work and its challenges were well described (Collin & Young, 2000; Karoly & Panis, 2004). Likewise, responses were outlined for advancing career counseling and vocational psychology in the face of rather daunting changes (Savickas, 2000, 2001a, 2003). By 2004 the shift had solidified into foundation for career counseling and vocational psychology as world-wide, cross-cultural endeavors (Hartung, 2005; Van Esbroeck, Herr, & Savickas, 2005).

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### **1.1. Going Global: Career Counseling Across Cultures**

The internationalization of career counseling has not progressed without a keen awareness of the need for more effective, comprehensive theories as well as interventions and techniques (Feller, Guichard & Lenz, 2005; Russell & Whichard, 2005; Savickas, 2001b). At the same time, the globalization of career counseling faces a growing need for increased intervention in the era of dwindling resources (Hartung, 2005). There is a definite need for low-cost, high-yield interventions and techniques or, in other words, affordable professional responses that can provide practitioners and their clients with a wealth of useful information. Posing even more exciting challenges is the necessity for theories, interventions, and techniques to have universal possibilities for navigating across cultures.

### **1.2. Paradigm Shift: From Matching to Designing**

Perhaps no effort carries as much promise and resourcefulness for navigating career counseling across cultures as the work of Savickas et al. (2009) and Savickas (2012) in the introduction of the life design paradigm. Savickas (2012) notes that life design is not meant to replace career education or vocational guidance as paradigms but rather to fit itself in among the others in a unique way. Life design is informed by five core assumptions: “contextual possibilities, dynamic processes, non-linear progression, multiple perspectives, and personal patterns” (Savickas, 2012, p. 90.). Theories of self-making and career construction are utilized as well (Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas, 2012). The counseling model of life designing rests on a theory of vocational behavior called career construction. Life designing or career construction counseling provides a most useful technique in the Career Story Interview (CSI). At the heart of the CSI is the concept of role models and their powerful impact on both self making and career construction. The new paradigm emphasizing life design in theory, intervention, technique, and concept, represents a significant shift toward advancing career counseling in cultures across the globe.

### **1.3. Career Construction**

Career construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2005a) engages an actual model of career counseling that can be distinguished from traditional vocational guidance and career education. Its relationship-based process used in assisting clients as they construct their careers (Savickas, 2011). Savickas (2005a) explained that career construction brings the work of Super (1957) into the diverse, global arena of 21st century careers. Savickas (2006) noted the unique nature of career construction theory in its use of narrative and Adlerian psychology as well as additional work by Super on career patterns (Super, 1954). Savickas summarized succinctly by saying, “I would say I use Super’s rationale and Adler’s methods but today we call it narrative” (Savickas, 2006).

Hartung (2011) noted career construction theory’s comprehensive nature with its focus on vocational behavior within four dimensions:

- (1) life structure, which comprises the constellation of work and other roles that configure a person’s life;
- (2) career adaptability strategies, which entail coping mechanisms individuals use to deal with developmental tasks and environmental changes that accrue over their life course;

- (3) thematic life stories, which encompass the motivations, drives and strivings that pattern a life; and
- (4) personality style, which constitutes the abilities, needs, values, interests and other traits that characterise a person's self-concept. (pp.107-112)

Career construction theory and counseling has a comprehensive, solid foundation for bridging the construction of self and career. Because of its rather compendious nature and its efficiency in procedure, career construction counseling can most often be accomplished in three sessions or less (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009, 2011).

#### **1.4. The Emergence of the Career Story Interview**

Career construction theory not only answers the call for more encompassing theory and effective interventions such as an actual model of career counseling but likewise provides a practical, advantageous technique known as the Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009) more recently referred to by Savickas (2011) as the Career Story Interview in acknowledgement of a more accurate description of the interview's purpose of assisting the client with authoring the story of his/her career.

The Career Story Interview (CSI) has received considerable attention recently in the professional literature. Taber, Hartung, Briddick, Briddick, and Rehfuss (2011) advocated for the use of the CSI as a means of attaining a more contextualized, meaningful picture of the client's self. Taber and Briddick (2011) highlighted the utility of the CSI for clients in managing their own careers in an age of uncertainty highlighted by protean realities and expectations. Del Corso, Rehfuss, and Galvin (2011) noted the CSI's usefulness as a resource for working with issues related to career adaptability. Rehfuss, Del Corso, Galvin and Wykes (2011) found that the CSI was deemed as effective in working with clients with career concerns, with a majority of clients in their sample reporting that the CSI had a positive impact for them in general help with their career concern, personal awareness, self-confidence, direction, and confirmation. Rehfuss, Cosio, and Del Corso (2011) examined the experiences of counselors who used the CSI within their work with clients. Findings revealed an overall positive experience in using the CSI particularly in the areas of exploring life themes as well as career decisions. Stoltz, Wolff, and McClelland (2011) found that the CSI in combination with interventions involving career and life-style assessment and interpretation had a positive impact in facilitating career decision making for a sample of African American senior high school students. Di Fabio and Maree's (2011) research among Italian entrepreneurs from the agricultural and trade sectors showed a decrease in their career decision-making difficulties and an increase in career decision-making self-efficacy, suggesting the value of group-based Life Design Counseling.

The Career Story Interview (CSI) is comprised of questions about specific areas of a client's life. In its previous versions as the Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009) questions were asked related to a client's: role models, favorite magazines or television shows, favorite story or book, personal mottos, favorite school subjects, and leisure related activities. At the end of these questions, the counselor gathers three early recollections of the client and then asks the client to provide headline-like titles for each recollection. More recently, Savickas (2011) in describing the CSI, eliminated favorite school subjects and leisure activities included in earlier versions of the interview and instead simply added early recollections as a fifth question. Most often the questions regarding favorite school subjects and leisure activities are included in the CSI.

### **1.5. Role Models as a Career Concept**

Embedded in the CSI is a concept worthy of further exploration based on its unique relationship to both self-building, identity shaping, and overall career construction namely, role models. During an interview about his approach to working with clients, Savickas indicated the CSI question related to role models is his favorite question. Savickas (2006) explained: "Yes, if I can only know one thing about a person I love to know who their role model was when they were growing up because it is the solution to the problems they faced in growing up" (Savickas, 2006). Savickas has emphasized that role models share something with the client in that the client views the role model as someone who has encountered challenges or concerns similar in some manner to the client's own and who has persevered in finding a solution in addressing the problem. Thus, role models reveal not only a central goal the client has in life but also the core concern or issue to be resolved as well as what the client sees as a solution to addressing the concern or issue at hand (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2011).

Clients use role models to design themselves during the process of self-construction. Savickas (2011) has described the current state of the term role model as trite from its excessive use. The true meaning of role models, he argued, is colossal, particularly in serving as blueprints for us as we design ourselves. Savickas (2006) summed up the unique nature of role models, "So, as an individual designs themselves, the blueprint for their life, for their solutions to life, is portrayed by a cultural script that we call a role model." The counselor typically collects three role models from a client (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2005a, 2009, 2011). It is important to work with role models clients can identify before age 10 because these early years are so critical for childhood curiosity about the world and how life should be lived (Erikson, 1963). Questions concerning role models start with a basic, short question, "Whom did you admire when you were growing up?" (Savickas, 2009, p. 298). Clients can be further encouraged to describe someone they admired perhaps to the point of attempting to emulate them in some way. Role models can be a famous or even a fictitious person. A role model can even be an animal character such as Lassie or Ferdinand the Bull. Clients can also be encouraged to think about people they deeply admired who were from their town or neighborhood. Savickas (1989, 1998, 2009, 2011) cited the importance in finding out specifically what the client admired asking the client to "Just tell me about the person as you viewed him or her back then. What were they like?" (Savickas, 2011, p. 57). Clients are also encouraged to think what all three role models share in common as well as how the client is like each role model and how they are different (Savickas, 2011). Counselors are discouraged from getting caught up in who the client admired growing up but rather focusing instead on what the client admired about their role models (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009, 2011).

Savickas (2011) noted the importance of paying careful attention to the first words used to describe role models as well as repeated descriptors or phrases. As clients are describing their role models they are in essence also providing valuable information about their own self. By attending to the client's descriptions of their role models practitioners can begin to pull together a fundamental sketch of the client's own self-concept.

Early on in the use of the CSI Savickas not only recognized the significance of role models but also the importance of the issue, predicament, or preoccupation presented as well as the interests engaged by the client to address the dilemma (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009). A recent example can be found in Taber et al. (2011) that illustrates just how role models can reveal both the life goal or core issue as well as what the client thinks will be required to resolve their dilemma. As a child, a young man admired a local television personality who hosted a children's program. The television host was "tuned in" to his audience and the needs of children. It would be years before the young man would

realize the significance of his role model. As an infant a physician had declared him dead. It was by the swift response of a nurse that he was saved. The young man in question eventually went on to work with students entering the medical profession as well as other helping professions, teaching them the significance of “tuning in” to what their patients or clients were trying to tell them as well as paying attention to their needs.

A second avenue of realizing the preoccupation or dilemma facing the client is to view the role model against the backdrop of the client’s early recollections (Savickas, 2005a, 2011). Often is the case where early recollections reveal preoccupations or problems clients are attempting to resolve at present, the movement from preoccupation to occupation. The case of Elaine found in Savickas (2005a,b) illustrated how a young woman had incorporated pieces of energetic, playful, spirited role models who stood up to authority and encouraged their peers to join them. They also modeled for her persistence, competition, and goal setting. The embraced pieces of her role models were found in other stories as well. Elaine’s presenting dilemma resonates with her first recollection when as a young girl she was told to sit still to avoid getting hurt. Elaine’s present concern involved her mother pressuring her to declare a major. In a sense her mother was telling her to stop worrying about choosing a major and just make the right choice in the eyes of her mother, pre-med. For Elaine, it felt much like being asked to sit still.

### **1.6. Taking In, Taking On, and Taking Hold**

While a client might not initially be able to articulate their own self-concepts at the beginning of the counseling process, role models become a mirror for the client, allowing them to see how they have used role models to shape their present self (Savickas, 2011). For Savickas the selection of role models in self-construction is critical. Role models are selected and not like the guiding lines established by parents, which are taken in unexamined. Essentially, in entering the world we do not have the ability to select our parents. However, we can and eventually do select role models (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009). We take in our parents as guides yet take on our heroes as models. Savickas (2006, 2011) asserted that because role models are selected they are, in essence, our first career choice.

Parents serving as guides enabled the client in their youth to absorb what it means to be a woman or man in their world (Savickas, 1989, 1998, 2009, 2011). Role models help the client navigate tensions that arise from parental prescriptions and preferences. Comparing guides with role models can facilitate further insight into the problem or preoccupation the client is attempting to resolve. Savickas (2011) provided the example of a client who identified Pocahontas as one of her role models noting that she admired how her role model was able to create a bridge between two cultures. Upon further questioning about her role model as compared to her parents the client revealed that her father was of Irish ancestry while her mother was of Apache ancestry. In essence, bridge building started for the client from day one in life (Savickas, 2011).

Echoing Wallis and Poulton (2001) Savickas noted that while guides serve as influences, role models are identifications. Both are internalized but by two rather different methods. Individuals internalize guides via introjection, unconsciously and in whole. Role models are internalized via incorporation. Identification with the role model leads to incorporation of the desired characteristics of the role model by the individual thereby transforming the self. While guides are taken in, role models are taken on. Guides are taken in as a whole while role models have some characteristics, deemed as significant and useful, taken on by the client. Thus, in the mind of the individual, guides are percepts while role models serve as concepts. Helping clients to become aware of and to reflect on the impact

of guides and role models is an essential piece of understanding oneself as well as constructing one's career (Savickas, 2011). Savickas (1989, 1998, 2009, 2011) cited the example of a client who struggled to please his tough father and his sensitive mother fearing pleasing one would mean displeasing the other. The client chose to integrate these two rather different ways of being in the world by selecting Robin Hood as a role model. He described Robin Hood as tough in his efforts to foil evil doers yet sensitive to the needy. The client would go on to head a community service agency with a rather unique style balancing being tough by also being sensitive to the needs of others.

Taking in parental guides and taking on role models assists individuals to take hold of and identity during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Role models provide the foundation for the dialogue between the client and counselor for what Savickas (2005a) described as the "what, how, and why of his or her career" (p. 65). Career construction and its emphasis on role models empowers clients toward mattering and greater meaning as clients move from tension to intention, from preoccupation to occupation, actively mastering what has been passively suffered (Savickas, 2011).

## 2. Conclusion

The start of the 21st century launched with a sense urgency and purpose for the fields of career counseling and vocational psychology in answering the call to respond to the complex, global arena of work and career. Both fields can be proud of the progress made in a little over a decade having answered the various charges and responsibilities admirably. The strengthening of the narrative perspective of career counseling and the emergence of interventions such as career construction counseling and the paradigm of life design have moved from the position of hope on the horizon to front-and-center in the research and praxis that await globally. The Career Story Interview and its impact on client discovery of how clients have constructed themselves and how they might or have constructed their careers, is an invaluable, priceless intervention. Understanding the unique relationship between role models, the self, and career can assist career theorists and practitioners alike in realizing the extent to which the concept of role models and techniques such as the CSI can be used across diverse settings and cultures. In an era of ever dwindling resources whether financial or the precious resource time, this brief list of questions is loaded and poised with potential. The concept of role models has great promise for easy access to critical client information and considerable cross-cultural import and utility. Every society has its own model examples, stories and cultural scripts readily available to its members. Whether these examples are human or nonhuman, factual or fictional does not matter. The aforementioned are generalizable enough for individuals to apply to their own life, constructing and designing who they want to be via these sources of self. With the momentum of the century's first decade, the road ahead can be more clearly defined through further inquiry into the emerging paradigm of life design, its theories, interventions, techniques, and concepts. Premise and promise duly noted, what awaits is a world of difference to be made in the lives of others, wherever they might be in the world.

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