Feeding the Narrative Stream:

Engagement in the Service of Intuitive Rationality

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Abstract

The trilateral model of adaptive career decision making is an integration of rationality, intuition, and behavioral engagement, defined as the process of expanding options via activities that increase the story tellers’ fund of information and experience. This talk will outline the model, examining its relationship to narrative at several points.
There is nothing so practical as a good theory. And a theory about one's life is, by definition, a narrative.

I had a dream the other night. A silly little dream about stumbling upon the VW repair shop that worked on my first car. In the dream I'm delighted to see they're still in business after all these years, and I start telling the owner all about my first VW. At that point I start to wake up, but what was interesting was what happened next, in the few minutes of half awake, half asleep, where truth plays by different rules. I found myself practicing my story to him, making sure that if I ever were to re-tell my VW story, that I would get it just right, going back and editing phrases to make sure I captured the subtle nuances of the wonder of that car. And as I became more and more awake, I realized what I had been doing, and it struck me in a profound way, we are story tellers.

For years, when I teach our masters level career development course, I have the students complete a portion of Bolles' work on functional skills. As a part of that, you write down several stories of things you consider achievements in your life, usually little things that meant a lot to you, though they might not be judged that way on the big screen. I would always teach by sharing an example from my own life, and would relate to them the story of how, at five years of age, I helped my dad build our house, the same house my mom is still living in these 50 years later. I remember being at the work site many days for many hours over that two-year period, helping lay tile, shoveling tons of
dirt, nailing lots of things. For the first several years that I related that story, it was about how I came to have the skills of being able to figure things out, of being able to look at a problem and make up a solution, sometimes with tools I didn't even know I had. I could weave an interesting allegory that would be prescient of my later tools with words, even as a career counselor. But then one day, my oldest son turned five, and I realized that none of the things I remembered really happened like that. Five year olds do not help build houses. In a flash of insight, my story became not about me learning to figure things out, but about my dad, miraculously allowing his five year old son to feel like he was contributing. My self efficacy about being a doer and a problem solver borne largely out of a story that I believed, but which largely was not true. Ah, the power of stories.

What I hope to accomplish over the next few minutes is to pique your curiosity about the role of narrative in career decision making. I am going to introduce a model of career decision making that my research team has been formulating over the past few years, a model that includes a rational component, an intuitive component, and a behavioral component we are calling engagement. In the end I will argue that while narrative is perhaps the best tool for working with material at the rational level, narrative itself is fueled by and therefore limited to a large extent by our contact with the world via engagement. I'll admit right up front that I don't hope you will come to believe these ideas today, only that some of these ideas might begin to haunt you.

When we talk about narrative in psychology, exactly what is it we are narrating? What is the pool of data that we touch in on when we construct our stories? When serving as therapists, we are often interested in re-storying past narratives, in finding healthier
ways of making meaning from pieces of memory. But as career practitioners, we are often quite interested in narrating present and future stories as well.

Around the present we might be asking, What feeds my soul? What are my interests? What puts me in flow? Future stories might ask, Who am I becoming? What will I find fulfilling? How will I survive? And the traditional, What will I be when I grow up?

When we face an assignment such as speaking out loud an answer to one of these questions, we face an enormously complex task. While our subjective experience of it feels like we are engaging in a highly rational act using fully conscious tools, research suggests otherwise.

Cognitive science tells us that when we engage in such a process, we are not simply requesting a particular class of information that our minds can deliver like a well trained librarian performing a computer search. Instead, much of what we think of as memory is actually constructed in real time, when we need it, from shards of memories, themselves stored as rather fluid elements.

Some narrative writers (e.g. Gergen, 1991) assert that the thoughts we have are bound by the language available to us with which we name our world. But that language inevitably comes to us through experience, either direct experience which yields the richest store of language and images, or through vicarious experience.

For the past several years, my research team has been grappling with the area of career decision making. Attending to these recent findings in cognitive science, we have moved away from a model of the person as agent who is willing and able to consciously attend to data about themselves, data about the world of work, and arrive at rational
conclusions about how those two bodies of data might intersect. Instead, what emerges from the literature is an agent whose behaviors are driven largely by non-conscious processes to which the person often has little or no access, even after decisions have been made and implemented. The narratives the person tells about the routes to those decisions, rather than being accurate details of decisional processes like lab notes, are more often renderings of imagined steps made by someone quite like me, in circumstances quite like mine. That is not to say that those narratives are wrong, but they do not exist in the way we subjectively experience them.

Our struggles to understand the human maker of complex life decisions led us unexpectedly to develop a model of career adaptability, with its evolutionary overtones on survival. And while our model leans heavily toward an adaptive decision maker, it includes, in addition to a rational component, a strong intuitive component, and the strongest possible statement of what we are calling engagement. For if we are to have any chance of utilizing intuitive processes, they must be well informed by our earthy engagement of the world of work. And if we are to have any chance to utilizing rational processes, they too will be more effective if we have informed them with the facts we can gather through our engagement with both the real world, and the world abstracted via language (as in books, websites, and the content of conversations).

Our emphasis on engagement is driven by research that says even when we fail in our attempts to articulate our intuitive and rational knowing, our unconscious processes, which are more often guiding our decisions anyway, are still informed and funded by the extent of our contact with the world. In other words, in a world where nothing is predictable and even our own decisional machinations are hidden behind a veil, our
money is on experience, and the best form of that is direct experience of the world via engagement.

In 1974, Ackoff declared human decision making to be "mess management". In 2005, his words seem almost prophetic. Back in 1974, as I was just beginning to lead my first career exploration groups, the mess I was most concerned with was the tangle of skills, interests, and values racing around in my client's head. The story I was telling myself as a neophyte career counselor was that all I had to do was help organize the messy insides, much like organizing Fibber McGee's closet that had fallen into disarray.

What none of us knew in 1974 was that in fact I was not, as I believed I was, engaged in a task of reaching in and unearthing the hidden treasures of my clients. Instead, I was co-constructing with them workable narratives of what skills and interests they might use in the future, based on pieces of stories they were able to conjure up when I asked for them. Savickas would later write in 1992 that "counselors who listen for life themes and stories act more as biographers who interpret lives in progress rather than as actuaries who count interests and abilities (p 338).

But since 1974, things have gotten a whole lot messier. The post-modern perspective on career is characterized by a state of affairs in which unpredictability is the norm and job security is history. Multiple transitions now characterize the arc of a typical career. The hierarchical structures that epitomized twentieth century organizations, in which entry-level employees could systematically ascend the hierarchy and attain increasingly greater responsibility, prestige, and income, have given way to structures that do not readily afford ascending career paths. “This matching person-to-position paradigm has served twentieth-century organizations and individuals well,” wrote
Savickas (2000), “but it relies on stable occupations and predictable career paths” (p. 56), neither of which are likely to be found in the postmodern era.

The Rational and Intuitive Dialectic

If coming to know what is inside is messy, and predicting the world of work is messy, the cognitive processes involved in bringing those two worlds together is the messiest of all. Vocational theorists have historically emphasized rational processing (Parsons, 1909) and unbiased hypothesis testing (Jordaan, 1963; Osipow, 1983) in career decision-making, advancing a vision of the adaptive decider as scientific, methodical, unfettered by distortions and emotional distractions, and committed to the maximization of personal gain (Phillips, 1997). In fact, within vocational psychology the representation of vocational introspection as a conscious and willful process remains the dominant paradigm (Krieshok, 2001).

However, our review of the more basic psychology literature on decision-making (Krieshok, 1998) calls into question this emphasis on reason, leading us to conclude that "most processing performed by the human mind for decision-making and behavior initiation is not performed at the conscious level" (p. 217). Specifically, empirical evidence from social and cognitive psychology research suggests that introspective access to cognitive processes is limited (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), that our cognitive processes are often confounded by biases and heuristics (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Simon, 1955; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; 1974; 1982; Wason, 1960), and that an intuitive mode of processing parallels the rational one (Epstein, 1994; Kahneman, 2003; Lieberman, 2003) and is active and influential in decision-making. This implies that
models of career decision-making predicated on the primacy of reason may be at fault in neglecting the critical role of intuition.

A review of the empirical research in our own specialty suggests a process that is not all that rational either. In a study involving college students trained in a five-step rational decision-making strategy, Soelberg (1967) was able to predict their post-graduate job choices in 87 percent of the cases. Although the students claimed to rely on the rational decision-making methods they had been taught, they typically opted for their initial intuitively-derived choices. Soelberg concluded that the students were in fact applying systematic methods, but not in the interest of making rationally informed decisions. Rather, he hypothesized, that they were actually constructing justifications for intuitively derived choices.

Blustein and Strohmer (1987) discovered in their studies a “robust tendency to use biased strategies in testing vocational hypotheses” (p. 57). And in 1997, our own Sue Phillips concluded that “Those who have considered what actually happens in the decision-making process have offered the nearly unanimous conclusion that rational decision-making simply does not reflect the decider’s reality” (p. 278).

In response to the body of evidence challenging the emphasis on rational processes in career decision-making, many researchers have proposed alternative models (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Our own anti-introspectivist (AI) view of career decision-making (Krieshok, 1998; 2001) affirms that decision-making processes are largely automatic and that "reflection on those decision-making processes is not only futile, but possibly confusing and detrimental to good decisions" (1998, p. 217).
Our view of career decision-making is compatible with Gelatt’s (1989) position regarding positive uncertainty, which incorporates acceptance of uncertainty, tolerance for ambiguity, and an emphasis on intuition in career decision-making. Gelatt makes the case that inhabiting the framework of positive uncertainty allows one to act even in the absence of clearly defined objectives.

These models share much in common with planned happenstance of Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999). Implementing planned happenstance involves teaching “clients to engage in exploratory activities that increase the probability that they will be exposed to unexpected opportunities” (p. 118). Furthermore, the activities should be undertaken with a sense of curiosity, persistence, flexibility, and optimism, as well as a willingness to take action in the face of uncertain outcomes.

Finally, Colozzi’s (2003) Depth oriented values extraction (DOVE) represents yet another counterpoint to the rational paradigm. Colozzi posits two distinct values systems that mutually influence cognitive and affective appraisals of options in the career decision-making process. Expressed work values are manifest, reflexive, and generally derived via introjections from sources of authority. In contrast, implied work values are latent, reflective, and tend to be more authentic. According to the author, incongruence between these systems can precipitate defaulting to expressed values and abandoning one’s authentic values, resulting in dissatisfaction in multiple life-space roles. DOVE involves a sequence of interventions designed to extract implied work values. The latent is made manifest, allowing one to base decisions on authentic values.

The Case for Engagement
Despite their diminished emphasis on rational methods, the anti-introspectivist view of career decision-making (Krieshok, 1998; 2001), positive uncertainty (Gelatt, 1989), planned happenstance (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999), and depth oriented values extraction (Colozzi, 2003), can be construed as approaches to the development of *adaptive rationality* (March, 1978). Adaptive rationality is defined as a state of affairs in which decision-making is optimal as a result of the accumulation of experience and information. This is consistent with Klein’s (1998) assertion that we tend to rely on both experiential and rational sources when making decisions, deriving manageable representations of situations via experiential sources and refining them, if necessary, via reason.

Likewise, the concept of adaptive rationality is consistent with our own trilateral model. A career decision-maker who recognizes the limits of rational and intuitive processing can arrive at a point of optimal decision-making as a result of behavioral engagement. In the trilateral model of adaptive career decision-making, engagement is defined as a process of expanding options via activities that contribute to the career decision-maker’s fund of information and experience in the interest of improved career-decision-making, rather than making a career decision. Adaptive career decision-making, in which decision-making is enhanced as a result of the accumulation of information and experience, becomes possible as a result of engagement. Engagement enriches the content from which vocational judgments and decisions issue. As a result of engagement, vocational and self-schemas evolve and vocational judgments and decisions are more informed.
Blustein et al (1997) interviewed workers who had gone through a school-to-work transition, and found that those who had engaged in activities that afforded exposure to work environments, and those who sought consultation from others about their vocational options, were more satisfied with their vocational choices. Those who engaged in such activities also exhibited significantly higher levels of congruence (Holland, 1997), which was correlated with a more flexible approach to the process of deciding on a vocation.

In fact, *engagement* has proven instrumental in adaptive career transitions experienced by adults in general. Ebberwein, Krieshok, Ulven, and Prosser (2004) interviewed adults going through career transitions as a result of job layoff, and found those who most successfully navigated the transition were those who, even when their jobs were going well and no transition seemed likely, were engaging in planful and transition-enhancing activities. Adaptive individuals think about and plan for their futures, even when they are not faced with imminent transitions, and sense change and react when they see it coming. Engagement, in this sense, can be understood as an adaptive defense against the likelihood of career transitions, or at least against their most devastating outcomes.

In making the case for engagement, it is important to distinguish it from career exploration. Super and Knasel (1981) defined career exploration as the act of obtaining relevant information in the interest of making adaptive career decisions. This implies an endgame issuing from a narrowing of options. In contrast, engagement implies a process of expanding options via activities that increase the decision-maker’s fund of information and experience. The aim of exploration is a *career decision*, while the aim of engagement is more informed *decision-making*. Consequently, there is a difference in respect to
implementation. Super and Knasel construed exploration as a cyclical behavior. In contrast, engagement is a relatively constant pursuit. As such, it constitutes the behavioral aspect of the trilateral model of adaptive career decision-making. Considered in its entirety, the model reflects the realization that career decision-making is not an exclusively rational practice and posits that reason, intuition, and engagement mutually contribute to adaptive career decision-making.

Narrative Applications in Decision Making

Interventions characterized as narrative in nature prove themselves useful at several points in our adaptive career decision making model. As Klein and others have demonstrated, decision making strategies that incorporate both rational and intuitive elements prove most successful. Narrative is the principal tool for translating intuitive data into a form that allows it to be given a place on the rational palate.

In addition, narrative interventions enrich rational data to give it soul. It is one thing to receive basic feedback on your Strong Interest Inventory, but it is quite another thing to be in a session with a real master, who is able to weave narratives from your life alongside narratives derived from the numbers and scales of the Strong. Which of those two experiences do you think stands the better chance of being incorporated into the client's decision making processes?

And after decisions are made, narrative is a most useful means for implementing decisions, as our work with homeless veterans showed. Helping clients articulate a narrative of a desired possible self, one year in the future, and then working backward to delineate small steps and goals along the way toward that one-year image proved useful in enabling even short term goals. As Baltes and Carstensen (1991) found, the more
elaborated people's proximal possible selves, the more protection they had against crises, the more motivation to engage in future goals and wishes, and the more purpose they had in life.

But in our model, all of these benefits of narrative approaches depend on the person being engaged in the world. Engagement is a critical precursor to possible selves, in that a more richly funded imagination will yield not only a greater variety of possibilities, but more realistic possibilities as well. And finding meaning in your experiences (engagement) allows you to link those meanings back to your decisions, where at least a part of the rational task that we used to call true reasoning is to map personal narratives onto socially agreed upon narratives.

A New Story for Vocational Interventions

I believe we in vocational psychology are ourselves in need of a new story about what it is we hope for in our clients. Our old story, a good match, has been dominant for nearly 100 years, but its prerequisites are stable and predictable work environments. Given the fluidity of the world of work, we need to encourage people to do something other than match, and I do not believe that it should be "match many times", or "match every time the world of work shifts away from your current solution". Instead, it makes sense to look at how folks effectively relate to the new world of work.

As humans, a part of our evolutionary success story is our ability to look at vast amounts of data and to find patterns. But a less adaptive byproduct of that legacy is our inclination to find patterns... even when none are present. The world of work is unpredictable, and growing more so by the day. While we are reasonably good at capitalizing on available patterns in our matching of interests and aptitudes to
occupational demands, we must come to admit that the amount of order we can find is limited, because there is in fact a great deal of randomness in the future.

We need to be teaching people to understand the limited availability of order, and teaching them how they might go about adapting on the fly, and how to capitalize on idiosyncratic events. Perhaps we should also be teaching people how to sit in the midst of chaos and accept it: Find order when we can find it, but let go of our demand that the world be completely ordered. These are new and very scary stories, especially if we start with a story of order and predictability. Helping our clients craft new narratives for themselves will require us to craft new narratives about ourselves and our work.
References


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