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A Constructivist Perspective for Counselling *

*'All across the intellectual landscape, the forces of
objectivism are yielding to the entrieties
of constructivist thought'
(G.S. Howard, 1991)*

*'Reality isn't what it used to be.'
(Anderson, W., 1990)*

*'I arrived in Bluefields, on the Nicaraguan coast, the day after an attack by the Contras. There were many dead and wounded. That night, an atrocious night, the air was boiling. I threw myself down on a terrace, alone, face to the sky. I was trying not to remember, not to feel, not to think about anything, anything whatsoever. A child of Bluefields, whom I didn't know, appeared from the darkness. He lay down beside me and began looking at the sky as I was, in silence. A shooting star fell. I could have made a wish but it didn't occur to me. The child spoke: "You know why stars fall. It's God's fault. He sticks them up badly. He sticks them up with rice water." I greeted the dawn dancing'
(Eduardo Galeano, 1991)*

Anderson (1990) has written that constructivism is more a momentum than a movement or system of thought. As a philosophical stance, it rejects realism and any claim to absolute truth or single reality. Vico, who is sometimes called the father of constructivism was a 16th century Italian philosopher who wrote: "As God's truth is what God comes to know as he creates and assembles it, so human truth is what man comes to know as he builds it, shaping it by his actions" (quoted in von Glaserfeld, 1984).

As a science, constructivism studies both the processes of thought and the processes of reality-making. We make meaning and reality both by thinking and by doing. Constructivists doubt that there is really a clear separation between body and mind, or between subject and object – further it is possible that through myth, metaphor and language, we all (all citizens of the planet) participate in a common social coupling which we call consciousness (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

Constructivists tend not to believe that we can find matches between human understanding or behavior and cosmic reality. The search for universal, natural laws of behavior is a search for something which, for constructivists, does not exist. Since there is no single, ultimate, objective reality, how could there possibly be laws expressing this reality in human behavior or in anything else, for that matter? Von Glaserfeld has proposed that we humans may 'fit' or not fit specific situations in better or worse ways but that it is useless to try to match us with realities. Think of a key. We know that it 'fits' a certain lock and not others. Yet we also know that there are various other devices like burglar tools and master keys that also fit the lock. Perhaps, says the constructivist, it is better to consider the fittingness of human behavior than the lawfulness or matching qualities of that behavior.

Constructivism is clearly an alternative to the received objectivist way of thinking about humans, about thinking, acting and being and about other aspects of the world as well. There is an old joke about three umpires which illustrates the differences between the objectivist view and two kinds of constructivism.

The three umpires are sitting around a bar table having a beer after the ball game. One says: "There's balls and there's strikes and I calls them the way they are." (Objectivist). The second says: "There's balls and there's strikes and I calls them the way I sees them." (Main stream constructivist). The third says: "There's balls and there's strikes and they ain't nothin' til I calls them." (Radical, postmodern constructivist).

Most constructivists do not deny that there is an 'out-there' world – they do deny that we can in any sense 'know' that out-there world as the one, true reality. Most would agree with Albert Einstein's depiction: "Out yonder this huge world, which exists independent of us human beings and which stands before us like a great, eternal riddle, at least partially accessible to our inspection and thinking." But as von Foerster (1984) points out, "out there' there is no sound and no music, there are only periodic variations of the air pressure ... Finally, for sure 'out there' there is no pain." It remains for we humans with our 'in here' of consciousness and

*) This document was prepared by the author to introduce constructivist thought to the reader and to argue for its suitability as a framework for counselling in a time of global transformations requiring personal and social transformations of people everywhere. The author wishes to acknowledge research support from: The University of Victoria, The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, and The British Columbia Ministry of Advanced, Education, Training and Technology.

our relational ability to make meaning from our experiencing of the materials which are 'out there'. Radical constructivists such as Nelson Goodman (1984) insist that versions of the world are all that exists for us as symbol-using creatures. He means that 'we make worlds' and that each of us has a version of the world.

There is no single agreed-upon definition of just what is meant by the term 'constructivism'. Constructivism is a complex and rather open-ended framework of theory and ideas and is given different meanings in various domains of scholarship and practice. As used here it refers to a group of theories about human thinking and action which includes such diverse disciplines as hermeneutics [art or science of interpretation adapted to the human domain] (Messer, Sass, & Woolfolk, 1988); philosophy (Taylor, 1989); feminist scholarship (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Noddings, 1984); social constructionism (Gergen, 1985); Kellyian 'personal construct theory' (1955); learning theory in the form of (1) self-organized learning (Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985), (2) transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), (3) educating reflective practitioners (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Schon, 1987), and (4) situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991); and, broadly, in human science (Aanstoos, 1985). In typical social science usage constructivism indicates an emphasis on persons as active agents in their ongoing development; while constructionism denotes an emphasis on the social contexts (such as relationship) that construct and orient our efforts at knowing, communicating, and becoming (Doise, 1989; Mahoney, 1991).

Within the field of personality, psychotherapy and counselling, there is a rapidly growing number of publications which can be identified as 'constructivist'. One important stream of ongoing study and application stems from the pioneering work of George Kelly (1955) with two recent publications; *Personal construct counselling in action* (1990) and by Fransella & Dalton and Burr & Butt's *Invitation to personal construct psychology* (1992).

Outside of the Kelly tradition there are now various approaches which can be considered to be constructivist approaches. For example, Jerome Bruner on the importance of meaning, construction and autobiographical thinking (Bruner, 1986; 1990) and in the field of family and therapy and counselling, White, Furman & Ahola, O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis stand out as constructivist-oriented practitioners. The recent books by Carlsen (1988) on meaning-making and Efran, Lukens & Lukens (1991) work entitled *Language, structure and change* are examples of recent constructivist applications in the field of counselling and therapy. Other related, recent works are Fisher's constructivist-based book for social workers and Niemeyer's edited book on constructivist assessment. The first book on social constructionist concepts has just appeared in 1992. Underlying virtually all discussions of constructivist theory and application lies a set of assumptions which establishes a common thread or constructivist 'perspective'. Five of these assumptions are:

1. Reality is a social, and therefore multiple, construction. 'Realities' exist as meaning-bounded constructions that are both intra- and interpersonally conflictual and dialectic in nature. This 'multiple realities' assumption is basic to constructivist thinking and contrasts sharply with the objectivist assumption of 'one true reality'.
2. Meaning is central to constructivist thinking. Meaning is created through interaction (as in counselling, or in research) between participants in the interactive process and through the mental processes of the individual. Meaning making and 'constructing' – processes which are rooted in minds and interactions replace, at least in part, the concepts of information-processing and behavior.
3. Humans are viewed as active organizers of their own experience-worlds. The individual 'creates' a self through organized patterns of meaning. Many patterns of meaning arise out of interactions, thus meaning is often 'relational'. Humans are acknowledged as the creators of knowledge, not simply the receivers of knowledge.
4. Action and meaning are interactive (constructivists tend to prefer the term 'action' to the term 'behavior' since action implies an agent or active doer while behavior implies a certain passivity. Molecules behave, people act). The fact that we construe a way of acting as meaningful increases our propensity for 'doing' the activity. Conversely, 'doing' the activity increases its meaningfulness to us. We often make meaning through acting.
5. Language in its function as communication, especially metaphor, narrative and conversation, is the means which humans use to construct realities and is central to the constructivist perspective. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of the narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others (MacIntyre, 1984).

Implications of a constructivist perspective for career counselling

Social interaction forms the context in which counselling occurs and the background out of which counselling competency arises. Principal elements of social interaction which constitute counselling are: (1) relationship, (2) language, (3) explication (meaning-making), (4) story and metaphor, and (5) power.

1. Counselling is carried out within the context of a helping relationship. Without some degree of relationship between counsellor and client, other counselling activities cannot be implemented.
2. Language is the medium in which counselling is conducted. In fact the heart of counselling is conversation. Counsellor and client engage each other in purposeful conversation as the primary means of negotiating reality and making meaning.
3. Counselling is a 'meaning-generating' process. In order to generate meanings it is necessary for the counsellor to assist the client in *explicitating* (uncovering, digging out, elaborating, clarifying) the meaning of the client's life experiences.
4. One of the most important functions of counselling is to enable the client to *'tell her story'* to someone who will listen in a respectful and engaged way. People not only tell stories, they are influenced by their own stories in regards to how they live and act in their own everyday living. Life stories provide a temporal structure, a sense of coherence, purpose, and sense of wholeness to living. Of course, stories are never complete and important parts of a story may be missing. When counsellor and client examine, talk about, and question the client's story, new elements, new interpretations, and new openings for change and acting are brought about. In addition to story, metaphorical thinking is of considerable importance to the constructivist. We use metaphors to explain our lives. For example, the client may say, "Right now, my life is like a rocky road." She is describing her life as being 'like a rocky road' – that is, describing her life in terms of another entity. It is very important for counsellors to respect metaphorical expressions and to attempt to stay with the metaphorical thinking which the client is using since that is what best fits the client's own understanding of how things are.
5. Power is always a factor in counselling. Counsellor and client usually occupy very different positions of power – that is, the counsellor has a more powerful status than the client. In general one can experience power in one of four different modes: powerful, overpowered, powerless, or empowered. The positive side is that lack of power often brings about the result that one feels constrained, dominated, or exploited. The aim of constructivist oriented counselling is to increase the client's sense of being empowered, and to develop the counsellor's own awareness of power so as to prevent unjust or unconscious use of counsellor-power in the counselling process, to the disadvantage of the client.

In specific reference to career counselling, implications of the constructivist perspective include:

(1) Reduction of the conceptual gap between career and life – this conceptual goal is indicated by the term, "lifecareer" put forward by Miller-Tiedeman (1988). Each person lives a life, within which there are careers, within which there are jobs, and throughout all of which weaves the meaning of work (Ginsburg, 1972; 1984). Furthermore, career theory and counselling should recognize that "lifecareer histories" are constructed by the individual out of an on-going dialectic of circumstance and personal desires and abilities. This point has been made by Tyler (1978):

An individual is not limited to one way of dealing with any of life's demands. Through encounters with a very large number of situations and persons exemplifying different possibilities for structuring reality, one puts together one's own repertoire of possibility processing structures [emphasis added] (p. 9).

(2) Placing meaning at the center of our conceptual space – meaning and personal constructs drive behavior (or "action," as we prefer to say), meaning-making and construing replace, at least in part, emphasis on information processing and behavior change (Carlsen, 1988; Mahoney & Lyddon, 1988).

(3) Accentuating the role of "agency" for both clients and counsellors. We take it that the human world is populated by "origins" rather than "pawns" (Taylor, 1985).

(4) Construing persons as self-organizing authors of their own lives – always within specific historical and cultural contexts (White & Epston, 1990).

(5) Taking the epistemological stance that human realities, both personal and social, are "negotiated" – that is, constructed and reconstructed. From our perspective, counselling and inquiry are both processes of reconstruction and closely resemble each other. The "counsellor" is also a "researcher," inquiring into the meaning structures of the other's lifeworld.

(6) Much of a constructivist-oriented training program for career counsellors stresses two human universals. The first is what Bruner (1990) terms reflexivity (critical self-reflection). Through reflection one is able to interpret self and culture by altering the past in terms of the present, or by altering the present in terms of the past. Introducing reflexivity into counsellor training in a thorough and disciplined fashion is a true revisionary step. The way to do this has already been shown in a preliminary way in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (Schon, 1987).

The second universal pointed out by Bruner is the human ability to *envision alternatives*, that is, the ability to construe "others ways of being, of acting, of striving." This outlook on human behavior is probably best represented by personal construct theory, and, in a rather different way, by hermeneutic-phenomenological approaches to understanding human behavior.

(7) Overcoming reductionist concepts and practices in career counselling and the training of career counsellors. For example, try to de-emphasize the "matching" of client traits with job requirements; resist temptations to reduce the person of the client into "variables" through psychometric procedures; refuse to invoke images of "information-processing" and "machine/computer" as useful models in career theory and counselling and guard against procedures which train counsellors to identify a client with that client's "file," thereby reducing chances for dialogue with the real client.

Multi-Dimensionality of Constructivist Career Counselling

From our perspective, the counsellor has four dimensions to keep in mind as he or she tries to be helpful to clients. Not exclusive of each other, these dimensions – relationship, agency, meaning-making and negotiation – can be stated as questions for counsellors to bear in mind when working with clients:

- (1) How can I form a *cooperative alliance* with this client? (Relationship factor).
- (2) How can I encourage the *empowerment* of this client? (Agency factor).
- (3) How can I help this client to *elaborate and evaluate his or her constructions and meanings* germane to this decision? (Meaning-making factor).
- (4) How can I help this client to *reconstruct and negotiate* personally meaningful and socially supportable realities? (Negotiation factor).

Career Counselling Experiments

What the counsellor and client do together in the career counselling process should be "fruitful" – that is, it should provide a re-construing or changed outlook on some aspect of life (Kelly, 1955). Or to put it another way, career counselling should be conducted as fruitful, productive experiments in living (Cochrane, 1987). The concept of "fruitfulness" replaces the conventional term, "outcomes." Fruitfulness directs our attention to assumptions, premises, attitudes, constructs, perceptions, outlooks, and to contextual understanding and to the enhancement of our power to interpret our circumstances and self.

We have chosen to use the term "experiment" instead of "intervention" to describe the strategic interactions which a career counsellor attempts to implement with clients. Experiments may be carried out in individual or group sessions, or can be self-implemented. Experiments range from the imaginal such as guided fantasy, to real world experiments such as going for a job interview. The helping alliance itself is an experimental structure.

In approaching a career decision, for example, a client has sets of beliefs about work, about self, and about occupations. These meaning structures are more or less organized and are in the form of both tacit and explicit types of knowledge. This knowledge constitutes what we can call a lay theory of career. Of course, this theory is frequently conflicted, uncertain, and always, to a degree, unique. Through experiments, the counsellor and client may open the future to a more productive, liveable decision for the client.

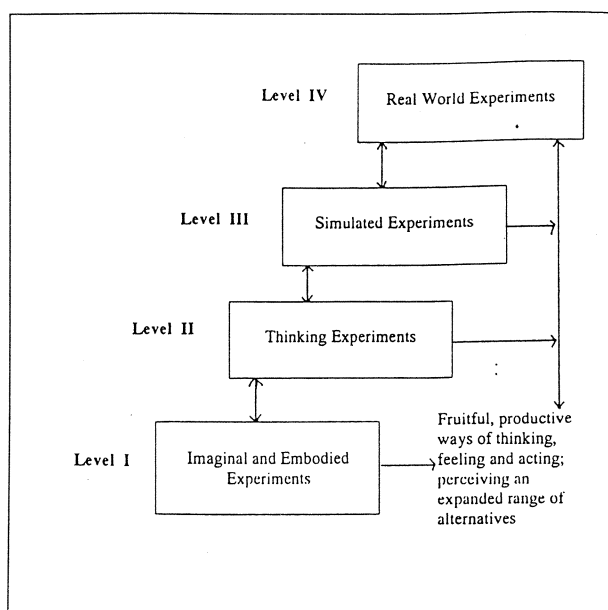
Decisions are the fundamental psychic events which "steer" movement in life. Decision is the bridge between wishing and action; to decide is to commit oneself to a course of action (Yalom, 1980).

In order to help clients make fruitful decisions, it is important to realize that there is nothing fixed about career decisions: they are fallible, contingent, and must remain open to revision. The constructivist career counsellor uses four types of "experiments" which may prove fruitful for the client (see Figure 1).

The most elemental level of experiments are those carried out in the imagination of the client (such as guided fantasy) or as an internal embodied process (such as focusing, for example). Second level experiments are those on the level of cognitive and emotional experiencing: thinking, belief, assumption, construct, value or emotional perspective (Examples include using a repgrid to interpret a client's construct map, engaging the client in critical self-reflection, using a laddering procedure or emotional reliving).

Third level experiments are those which engage the client in simulation or vicarious experiences (examples are role-play, two-chair technique and skill-learning). Fourth level experiments are those carried out in the so-called "real world" (examples include applying for a job, participating in a work experience project, interviewing a career mentor).

Figure 1: Categories of Experiments



Within our perspective on career counselling, the term "experiments" refers to all those planned efforts which the counsellor, in cooperation with the client, initiate in order that the client may come to think, act, and feel more productively in relation to some dilemma or trouble in life. This is in keeping with Kelly (1955), who observed that a stabilizing effect in how one is living seems to result from "seeing oneself in a functional relationship" (p. 365) with the people and things in one's lifeworld; and this seems to hold not only in psychotherapy but in contexts such as vocational counselling and guidance.

Counsellors Who Also Think

Serious questions have been raised about the wisdom of specific micro-skill training approaches in counsellor education (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988; Mahon & Altmann, 1977; Martin, 1990). Three principal concerns have been voiced: (1) ultimately it seems to be the counsellor's ability to see, hear and understand the subtleties of client experience rather than the counsellor's ability to display specific "skills" that determines whether or not counselling is effective; (2) micro-skill training may produce robot-like behaviors in counsellors who by virtue of their habituated skills are incapable of perceiving and responding to diverse client needs; and (3) finely honed micro-skills do not necessarily transfer into useful behaviors in the everyday world of clients and counselling (Galassi & Galassi, 1984).

There is fairly strong evidence that it is not simply the specific skills which the counsellor has which lead to effective work with clients as it is the counsellor's ability to construe and think about the client and the ability to assist the client to explicate the meaning structures of the client's lifeworld. In Martin's (1990) words:

It is not the skill as such, but "... underlying conceptualizations, grounded in ... knowledge and dispositional structures (that) ... lead to effective, intentionally driven therapeutic actions."

It seems that counsellors face clients and contexts which call for indeterminate modes of practice. That is, they must make sense of uncertain, conflicted and unique situations of practice. It cannot be assumed that professional skill and knowledge fits every client case, nor can it be assumed that there is one right solution to each problem. Training should move counsellors along the way of being able to devise new methods of reasoning; constructing and evaluating new categories of understanding; using new ways of framing problems; and negotiating new courses of action and experiments with clients.

It is not so much that all skill training should be discontinued in counsellor education, but that counsellor education needs to go beyond skill training. The artistry-in-action approach to developing professional skill and knowledge advocated by Schon (1987) is one model. Other models are critical reflection as advocated by

Mezirow (1990) and „new paradigm“ curricula as outlined by Bevis and Watson (1989). While Bevis and Watson are proposing curricula for the training of nurses, many of their recommendations fit equally well when applied to counselling.

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Une perspective constructiviste pour l'orientation

Résumé

L'auteur R. Vance Peavy présente une approche socio-dynamique de l'orientation avec laquelle il est possible de définir à nouveau la théorie et la pratique de l'orientation ainsi que la formation des conseillers en prenant en considération les conditions sociales et intellectuelles.

Le cadre appliqué à ce sujet par les sciences sociales comprend les personnes comme des agents actifs de leur propre évolution, laquelle s'effectue dans un contexte social. Sous cette perspective constructiviste on comprend l'orientation professionnelle comme interaction sociale qui est constituée par les éléments (1) relation (2) langue (3) explication (en tant que explication du sens) (4) récit et métaphore ainsi que (5) pouvoir. Par conséquent il faut que le conseiller prenne en considération quatre dimensions pour aider le client: Comment peut-il construire avec le solliciteur une alliance coopérative? Comment peut-il renforcer les forces de celui-ci? Qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire pour élaborer une décision rationnelle et pour la contrôler? Qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire pour aider le client de créer pour soi-même une réalité très significative et compatible avec sa vie sociale ainsi que de l'user.

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Eine konstruktivistische Perspektive für die Beratung

Zusammenfassung

Der Autor R. Vance Peavy stellt einen soziodynamischen Beratungsansatz vor, mit dessen Hilfe aus den sozialen und intellektuellen Bedingungen heraus Beratungstheorie, -praxis und Beraterausbildung neu definiert werden.

Der dabei verwendete konstruktivistische Rahmen versteht innerhalb der Sozialwissenschaften Personen als aktive Agenten ihrer eigenen Entwicklung, die sich in einem sozialen Kontext vollzieht. Berufsberatung wird unter dieser konstruktivistischen Perspektive als soziale Interaktion verstanden, die durch die Elemente (1) Beziehung, (2) Sprache, (3) Erklärung (als Sinnstiftung), (4) Erzählung und Metapher sowie (5) Macht konstitutiv begründet wird. Danach muß der Berater vier Dimensionen berücksichtigen, um dem Klienten zu helfen. Wie kann er mit dem Ratsuchenden eine kooperative Allianz begründen? Wie kann er dessen Kräfte stärken? Wie kann man helfen, eine sinnvolle Entscheidung herauszuarbeiten und zu überprüfen? Wie kann man dem Klienten helfen, sich eine für ihn bedeutungsvolle und sozial verträgliche Realität zu schaffen und mit ihr umzugehen?