Use of My Career Chapter in to Engage Students in Reflexive Dialogue

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Abstract

Higher education students provide many reasons for their taking a particular degree. These typically relate to their current vocational interests and future employment prospects. This is significant since students' vocational identities and consequent decisions develop in a complex dynamic of vocational personality, characteristic adaptations, and life stories, all interacting with affordances in the social, economic, and cultural contexts of students' lives. Using contemporary personality theory and vocational psychology theory, we focus on the third dynamism—life stories—to explicate a method that facilitates assessment for and of learning in the context of career. Here we describe the conceptual and methodological dimensions of "My Career Chapter—A Dialogical Autobiography" (McIlveen, 2006) as an exemplar of an innovative pedagogical method with its conceptual foundations in vocational psychology and the theory of dialogical self. We will describe examples of its application in postgraduate studies and elaborate on its teaching and assessment affordances for career education. Finally, we will outline practical implications for the continuing application and evaluation of My Career Chapter, and the curricular vision that drives it, in higher education and career development learning.

Conceptual Foundations of My Career Chapter

My Career Chapter—A Dialogical Autobiography (MCC; McIlveen, 2006) is a semi-structured, qualitative career assessment tool and learning activity. MCC enables the user (e.g., student or client) to compose a brief autobiographical narrative about his/her career. Typically, the narrative created through MCC is integrated into career learning activities within educational or counselling contexts. These activities focus on crucial developmental tasks, such as exploration of occupational interests, career decision-making, values clarification, and resolving career conflicts. Moreover, the constructivist, meaning making narrative generated through MCC is used to elucidate career-related *life themes* (Savickas, 2005) that are authored, narrated, and edited by the dialogical self (McIlveen & Patton, 2007).

MCC is conceptually grounded in the systems theory framework of career (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014) and dialogical self theory (DST; Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). MCC is the product of conceptual and pragmatic convergence of STF and DST (McIlveen, 2007b) that allows for not only the theorization of narrative as a source of personal identity with regard to career, but also the procedural enactment of their convergence in the form of a practical tool for career learning. Here we introduce the conceptual elements of the STF that integrate career theory with DST.

The STF is not a theory per se; instead, Patton and McMahon (2014) use the word "framework" to delimit the STF as a paradigmatic organizer of theories. No psychological theory can completely—conceptually, empirically, pragmatically—describe the complex dynamism that is a person; thus, it is the STF's epistemology that multiple theories related to various career influences and the interaction of systems that constitute the person may be integrated without being subsumed. Accordingly, the STF posits an individual as *systems of contextual influences*—intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental, and societal—that must be considered holistically.

Figure 1 presents the individual-in-context. Each influence may be understood in its own right and theorized as a separate entity; however, STF demands that influences should be understood as affecting one another interactively rather than as separate, isolated phenomena. Intrapersonal influences include those that are typical foci for career learning activities, such as interests, skills, and abilities. Also included are influences that signal important matters of diversity, such as ethnicity, disability, gender, and sexuality. Consistent with DST's

perspective on a globalizing world, STF posits the individual in context, surrounded by and part of influences including external proximal and distal influence. Within DST, the individual may be conceptually contextualized among global landscapes: ethnoscape, ideoscape, ecoscape, mediascape, financescape, technoscape (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). A person may generate an I-position for any and all of the influences identified in the STF (McIlveen, 2007b). Thus, there is scope to conceptually align STF and DST as frameworks that capture the multidimensionality of person's career extends from dialogue of intra-personal *I-positions* at a proximal, local dimension, outward to include distal external *I-positions* as far as a global dimension. There may be intrapersonal I-positions (e.g., as a conscientious person, a person with a disability) and interpersonal I-positions (e.g., as a friend, a work colleague), or contextual I-positions linked to societal and environmental matters (e.g., as a political protestor). All these I-positions are endowed with different voices, embodied as one person, and may relate to one another across time and space, as in a *chronotope*.

The I-positions taken on the influences that constitute the multi-level space of career, given in the STF, are the psychological context for one another—acting as a theatre of voices (Hermans, 2006). Some I-positions align with one another, as in the DST notions *self-agreement* and *self-consultancy* (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) yet also simultaneously conflict with others with different perspectives, as in DST's *self-conflict* and *self-criticism*. It is often the case the clients who attend career counseling are in conflict—experienced as indecision, self-doubt, and anxieties about what to do in their studies or work.

The STF posits *story* as central to understanding a person's career. It is through story and the multiplicity of career influences that the STF may converge with the theory of dialogical self by taking career influences identified in the STF as sources for an *I-position* (McIlveen, 2007b). It is amidst this ostensible cacophony of voices that career narratives are authored, narrated, and edited, by multiple I-positions (McIlveen & Patton, 2007; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015b). A person may very well write and tell a story about the career influences in his or her life, spanning the story across the past, present, and future. MCC captures this dynamic process for the purpose of generating a short career autobiography, both objectively as narrative data and subjectively as the personal experience of co-constructing, deconstructing, re-constructing, and constructing narrative identity that subsumes and integrates the career influences in the STF. This process give rise to the *meta-position* (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Winters, Meijers, Lengelle, & Baert, 2012) that brings

organization and coherence to the many, and sometimes competing, I-positions that constitute a person's career.

Figure 1 also depicts the complexity of the systems of influences that recursively affect one another, change over time, and respond to chance events. Thus, this STF incorporates past, present, and future into career. Indeed, clients and students considering their career tend to focus on the future in asking questions of themselves (e.g., "What should I do after I graduate?", "What may happen if I don't take the offer of promotion?", "When will be the better time for us to start a family?"). Such questions will engage self-consultancy, but also engage self-conflict among different I-positions. Accordingly, the DST notion promoter positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Winters et al., 2012) are very important to the process of career counselling and career learning because of their orientation toward the future. Promoter positions may be internal in origin (e.g., I as an achiever) or external, significant others (e.g., My father as mentor). Promoter positions become acutely important during times of transition or shock in which the person is in unfamiliar circumstances. The scenario of "losing my job", for example, implies a loss of some part of self (e.g., Me as worker). This loss may take away contextual sources of affirmation and raise the voices of I-positions shouting self-criticism (e.g., Me as bread winner) Now, in a time of confusion, the promoter must rally other voices to dialogue about the future, perhaps include I-positions from earlier years in life who know how to carry on in the face of adversity.

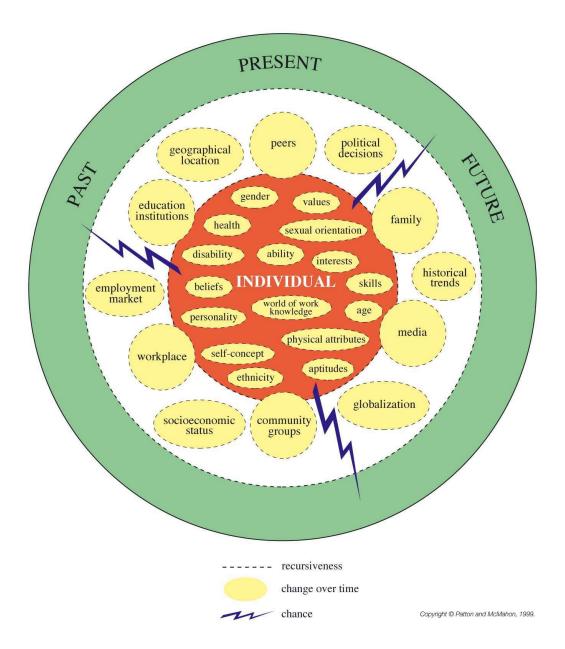


Figure 1. The systems of career influences: intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental, and societal (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Reproduced with permission.

Dialogical Career Learning and Career Writing

MCC is an example of a *career writing* learning and assessment activity. Career writing is a method based on of dialogical career-learning theory, the product of the integration of DST with Law's (1996, 1999a) career-learning theory (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002a; Lengelle & Meijers, 2014, 2015; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015a; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015b). Dialogical career-learning theory continues a trend started with career-learning theory, of divergence away from positivist theories of career development, focused primarily on person-environment fit, toward social constructivist career development theories, focused more on the construction and subjective experience of personal and professional identities (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002b; McCash, 2006; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015b).

Career-learning theory supports participative, experiential, and social learning, pedagogical approaches which can deepen and contextualise students' learning and encourage them to develop and articulate their professional and personal identities (Law, 1999b; Law et al., 2002b). At its heart, career-learning theory includes a developmental learning sequence to reflect the process by which people develop career identities and make career decisions:

- 1. Sensing: gathering information and assembling sequences into meaningful narratives.
- 2. Sifting: making comparisons and creating and using concepts.
- 3. Focusing: appreciating alternative points of view and developing one's own.
- 4. Understanding: explaining the past and anticipating future consequences (Law, 1999).

Career-learning theory's learning model is useful in that the cognitive process of sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding promote the development of helpful reflective narratives from which conclusions and decisions could be drawn. However, this process does not adequately reflect the increasing complexity, uncertainty, and instability of 21st labour markets or the emotional and psychosocial responses of those trying to succeed in them (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002; Meijers, 2002; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In response to this gap in career-learning theory, Meijers and Lengelle (2012) argued that "the development of a career story must be understood not only as a cognitive learning process but as a dialogical learning process as well" (p. 169) and developed career writing to exploit the affordances of DST in facilitating transformational career learning experiences (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014; Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2014).

A dialogical career-learning process begins in response to a "boundary experience" in which an individual is challenged by a situation at the boundaries of their existing understandings of their self, their environment, and their relation to others (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, p. 163, 2015). Boundary experiences are expressed narratively as "first stories", characterised by fear, frustration, or hopelessness, which are shaped by the chorus of I-positions that contribute their voice to the attempts of the individual to make sense of their experience (Lengelle & Meijers, 2015; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, p. 163). During difficult boundary experiences, I-positions may act in opposition to each other, contributing selfconflict and self-criticism dialogues to the individual's narrative and leaving them stuck and unable to productively work through their challenges (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). The goal of dialogical career-learning is to promote the development of empowering and productive "second stories" facilitated by the adoption of meta-positions, which allow for detached understanding of competing I- positions, and promoter-positions, which orient the learner toward positive action and identity reformation (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010)(Lengelle & Meijers, 2015; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, p. 163; Winters et al., 2011).

Career writing has been identified as a particularly promising pedagogical approach to promoting dialogical career-learning in the "transformational space" between the learner's first and second stories (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, Geijsel, & Post, 2015; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, p. 164; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015b). Career writing describes a range of writing exercises which can be used to facilitate dialogical career-learning and can include creative writing, expressive writing, and reflexive writing (Lengelle et al., 2014; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015b). Evaluations of career writing interventions indicate that it holds promise as an effective and efficient method for helping students explore and evolve their career identities as they prepare to enter uncertain and unstable labour markets (Lengelle & Meijers, 2015; Lengelle et al., 2015).

We now turn our attention to MCC as a specific example of a career writing activity that reflects the pedagogical affordances of dialogical career-learning theory.

Procedural and Technical Features of MCC

As a qualitative career assessment and counselling tool, MCC is both a process and a product: reflexively writing (i.e., process) a narrative (i.e., product). Accordingly, MCC enacts the dynamic narrative processes of "co-constructing (uncovering the story), de-

constructing (opening up the story), re-constructing (weaving a unified self-constructed storied identity), and constructing (performing in the next chapter of the story)" (Brott, 2015). Moreover, MCC is a process of career learning that is articulated by Meijers and Lengelle (2015b) as "transformation through writing" (p. 45) and engages a person in dialogue that produces a revised second story with new perspectives on what meaningfully composes that person's identity.

Furthermore, MCC shares many of the qualities of effective career interventions, as described in a series of meta-analytic studies which showed that repeated group interventions facilitated by career development professionals are most effective (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Brown et al., 2003; Whiston, Li, Goodrich Mitts, & Wright, 2017), particularly when their design and delivery includes several of the *critical ingredients* of career interventions: written exercises, individualised interpretations and feedback, world of work exploration, modelling from competent others, support from social networks, counsellor support, values clarification, and psychoeducation (Whiston et al., 2017)(Brown et al., 2003; Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). Each of these principles are afforded by MCC's conceptual foundations, procedures for administration, and technical features, a precis of which are described hereafter.

MCC is a booklet into which the user writes autobiographical statements relevant to each of the career influences in the STF. The intended learning outcome is that the user develops a broader understanding of the multiplicity of influences that constitute his or her career and insight into how the influences interact with one another. The process occurs in sections referred to as "Steps", which alludes to the metaphor of career as a journey. These steps are described subsequently. MCC may be administered as a print document for handwritten completion or as a MS-Word document for completion by typing. There is no substantive difference between the two forms; however, the hand-written version takes longer to complete than the electronic version. An English language copy of MCC is available free-of-charge at: https://eprints.usq.edu.au/23797/.

Step 1:Warm-Up Questions. The user opens MCC to find a brief commentary about how he or she should think about career as a complex of influences. This step is involves a "warm-up" activity in which the user considers a list of questions. These questions begin the crucial process of de-centering career, which means to encourage the user to extend contemplation beyond a narrow focus on typical intrapersonal topics such as interests, skills, and abilities. The user's answers per se are not so important; what is important is that wider contextual influences are given some consideration so as to foster the creation of a story that

has greater potential to include more I-positions and, thereby, generate more dialogue (e.g., Do you want to work in a rural or metropolitan area? How does your cultural background affect your career thinking?) The user may write brief notes in response to these questions. The initiation of de-centering continues in Step 2.

Step 2: Pondering the Big Picture. Next, the user is introduced to the multiplicity of career influences: "Every person has a unique career and one that is affected by a whole lot of different influences present in life—some obvious and others not. This second step will help you to see the big picture of your career". Figure 2 is presented along with instructions to contemplate each influence in the STF, their relative importance and how they interact with one another. Again, the user is invited to write notes. Having seen the so-called big picture of career in the present step, in Step 3 the user turns to the process of juxtaposing the career influences.

Step 3: Compatibility of Influences. Now the user actively considers the career influences in relation to one another. The process is active in the sense that the user is required to rate the valence of the relationship between each intrapersonal influence and each contextual influence. The process is modelled on Herman's (2001) Personal Position Repertoire method for generating associations among I-positions. As shown in Figure 2, the career influences are arranged into a matrix with contextual influences along the top x-axis and the intrapersonal influences along the left side y-axis. The influences on the x-axis are taken as external I-positions and those on the y-axis are internal I-positions. The user is instructed to rate the compatibility or incompatibility of any two influences using a rating scale: Very much incompatible = -2; Mostly incompatible = -1; Neither compatible nor incompatible = 0; Mostly compatible = +1; Very much compatible = +2. This rating serves to create a sense of distance or psychological space between influences, as indicated by the numeric value (i.e., 0 to 2) and their sign (i.e., positive or negative). Again, users are invited to write notes about thoughts, feelings, and significant compatibilities and incompatibilities essentially formulating a number of relevant I-positions that are lending their voices to the client's career story. Having completed the de-centering processes in the first three steps, the user now turns to writing the manuscript per se.

	Workplace	Peers	Family	Community	Media	Location	Industry Trends	Finances	Job Market
My Career									
Interests									
Skills & Abilities									
Values									
Knowledge									
Age									
Gender									
Health									
Sexuality									
Culture									
Morals									
Education									
Dreams &									
Aspirations									
Emotional									
State									
Work									

Figure 2. Compatibility matrix of career influences (McIlveen, 2006).

Step 4: Writing the Manuscript. Now the user takes on the role of an author—an I-position in itself. Carefully attend to the words just written, "an author". That a person can be an author implies the potential for multiple authors, whereas "the author" implies one. Concordant with dialogical self theory, MCC proceeds from the assumption that writing a manuscript requires the user to know that there are potentially many different authors taken as I-positions writing from different perspectives; there need not be only one. This assumption is germane to fostering users' understanding that their lives are not a constrained story that is predetermined or predestined, and therefore beyond self-regulation. This stance is particularly important for supporting individuals who are in a state of career indecision or plateau embedded in a narrative of helplessness. There may be substantive contextual constraints on a person's career that diminish autonomy and volition (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016); however, MCC may be used to elucidate narratives that foster critical consciousness of and pragmatic responses to such constraints. Thus, generating different perspectives from multiple I-positions plays a crucial role in writing a narrative that is felt by user as liberating and transformative (McIlveen, 2012; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015b).

In Step 4, the user is instructed to write a paragraph about each career influence, using the sentence-completion paradigm (Loevinger, 1985). The user completes five sentence-stems for each influence. Three sentence-stems refer to the career influences with respect to past, present, and future; one stem refers to the user's emotion response to the career influence; and the final stem refers to the impact of the career influence. For example, the following stems from MCC address career influence Morals:

I have always believed strongly that...

I believe that career...

What I believe in the future...

I mostly feel very positive / positive / indifferent / negative / very negative in relation to my morals because...

My morals have a very positive / positive / indifferent / neutral / very negative impact upon my career life because...

The fourth and fifth stems include ratings of an influence's valence so as to foster affective engagement in the narrative. Upon completing a paragraph for all of the career influences, the user progresses to Stage 5 to engage a metaphorical editor—another I-position.

Step 5: Proof Reading to Yourself and Back Again

Theory of dialogical self specifies that the voice of I-position may be drawn from a source in the past, present, or future (i.e., chronotope). Step 5 requires the user to read the manuscript aloud to its editor who is the user in another time. The editor represents a metaposition which can observe and comment on an array of I-positions with some degree of detachment:

You are going to read the manuscript to yourself out loud as if you are the editor of your life story, but you are not going to read it to the you, as editor, who is here reading in the here and now. You are going to read it to yourself as you were five years ago; that is, reading it to the you, as editor, from the past.

The user may support the process by talking to a photograph of him or herself taken all those years ago. A photograph can help when it is difficult to visually imagine oneself in the past. Clients report the process of reading aloud as quite a significant experience because of the novelty of hearing their own words in the own ears (McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2008).

Dialogue between author and editor is enhanced by a process in which the editor speaks to the author in the present sense. The editor, taking a perspective from the past, talks about his/her responses to hearing the narrative.

Now that you have read the manuscript, it is time to get some feedback from the editor—you from five years ago. Imagine yourself and your voice five years younger. What would younger you say to you now? Write your editorial comments in the spaces below while imaging it is the younger you doing so, as if the younger you is writing back to the older you after hearing your manuscript.

Now, having received the editor's feedback, the present time author concludes the manuscript.

Step 6: The Conclusion. In this final phase of writing the manuscript the user writes paragraphs about strengths, obstacles, and the future. The sentence-completion method is used again. The user is encouraged to write in an action-oriented manner so as to raise options for engage in actions that are consistent with the narrative a process which represents the writing into being of a promoter position and attendant second career story (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Winters et al., 2011).

Step 7: Final Reading to a Confidante. Once again, the user has an opportunity to read aloud the manuscript, including the Conclusion. On this reading, the user presents the story to a person who is trustworthy (e.g., counsellor, friend).

You and your confidante should work through your story carefully and discuss important themes and plots in your career story so that the next chapter is even more interesting and rewarding. Before and after you have meet with your confidante you may experience spontaneous recollections, thoughts, feelings, or maybe develop a different view on your career and life.

An alternative to this interpretive process is to have the confident read the story aloud to the user. In either case, the process is about generating dialogue about the story.

An Application of MCC in Postgraduate Coursework

In this section we present a specific example of MCC used in higher education, within a master degree qualification for educational counsellors. Counsellors, especially those engaged in counselling for career-related matters, should have considerable insight into their own careers. Thus, it is incumbent on both counsellors and counsellor-educators to develop an ethic of reflexivity (McIlveen, 2015c). In addition to its utility as a career assessment tool for career counselling and career education activities, MCC is a tool for developing reflexivity within counsellors (McIlveen & Patton, 2010). Since 2006, MCC has been as an assessment task for a course that is part of a postgraduate degree in education, which includes specialisations in guidance and counselling, adult education, and career development. In this course, students are encouraged to engage in a cycle of empirical reflective practice that draws on evidence from the disciplinary literature and experience from their own personal and professional lives. This dynamic is driven by what is unknown, which subsequently generates questions and the pursuit of answers to produce what is known. As human beings, counsellors evolve. As they evolve, they are confronted by new unknowns about themselves as practitioners, by principles emanating from revised theory, and by practices derived from their own and others shared experiences. Responding to questions emanating from these unknowns furthers the cyclic pursuit of answers and new knowledge.

After completing MCC, the students are required to write a reflective and interpretive essay that integrates relevant theory drawn from the disciplinary literatures of vocational psychology, career development, and counselling. The autobiography created through MCC is to be treated as narrative data. The students are to interpret the data from the perspective of theory, as they would for narrative data drawn from interviews with their clients or, indeed, their clients' MCC manuscripts. The reflective essay must demonstrate connections between three Ps: the practitioner, the principles, and the practices. The three must be integrated coherently and meaningfully in order to demonstrate a genuine engagement in reflective

practice. In a subsequent course in the degree program, the students are required to administer MCC to a client and then interpret their client's autobiography in a similar fashion, treating the client's narrative as data that is to be understood in terms of the three Ps. The data of the MCC are interpreted using career and counselling theory.

Preparing the reflective and interpretative essays involves application of career theory and counselling theories to formulate the self and client data solicited by MCC. In both cases, the essays are submitted as formative and summative assessment.

Potential in Higher Education

MCC is an example of sustainable assessment and feedback, which both meets the immediate needs for student learning but also promotes the skills and mindset needed for lifelong, self-managed learning and reflection (Boud & Soler, 2016). MCC is a scaffolded process which afford several key approaches to sustainable assessment: self- and peerfeedback, reflection, and the positioning of assessment as part of, rather than distinct from, learning experiences (Boud & Soler, 2016). In dialogical career-learning assessments and activities, this dialogue is not simply between the learner and teacher or the learner and their peers, but between the various I-positions of the learner themselves. In these complementary paradigms of dialogical career-learning and sustainable assessment, assessment is less the demonstration of acquired knowledge and more an apprenticeship in judgement and participation in a community of practice.

There is scope to consider the impact of MCC or a comparable assessment type on desirable forms of student learning made possible by the sharp focus on promoting learner reflexivity. According to Tan (2007) effective assessment in Higher Education should enable students to "form the habit of personal reflection in lifelong learning" (p.114). Such assessment thus promotes "critical skills" that enable students to make judgements about their own learning, become self-directed learners, and to re-examine and transform existing attitudes to develop greater responsibility for their learning. Boud (2010) concurs, claiming that assessment is most effective when it enables students to self-critique, make informed judgements, and take responsibility for their learning via self-reflection and engagement in dialogue with peers and teachers about their performance.

Another possible trajectory might involve the application or extension of MCC in the development of what Bridgestock (2016) refers to as "employability 2.0" social network capabilities. These include the "skills and knowledge required to build, maintain and use personal and professional relationships with others for mutual benefit in work or career"

(Bridgestock, 2016, p. 1). Bridgestock's work leverages the theory of social capital and the idea that individuals today can shape, promote and co-create a networked career identity by using digital and other networks as the site for engaging in genuine service to others. This version of employability moves us towards a genuinely social constructionist vision of career story co-creation that purposefully connects students with co-creators in the wider world (Bridgestock, 2016). Bridgstock's vision of connectedness learning aligns well with dialogical career learning, which in addition to facilitating students' internal dialogues, promotes a culture of authentic external dialogue — educators conversing with students, rather than simply at or about them — as a way to help the students develop helpful I-positions as learners and professionals (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011; Winters et al., 2012).

Conclusion

MCC has its conceptual foundations in the STF of career and DST. Here we have described its conceptual and technical features that underpin its utility in university training of counsellors. Readers interested in research underpinning the development and evolution of MCC should consult alternative sources that report on: MCC's operationalisation of the sentence-completion paradigm (Loevinger, 1985; McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005); clients' (McIlveen et al., 2008) and counsellors' experiences of it (McIlveen, 2007a; McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2007), including its utility as a tool for reflective practice (McIlveen & Patton, 2010); alternative models of interpretation (McIlveen & du Preez, 2012); demonstrations of its application in counselling (McIlveen, 2015a, 2017a, 2017b); versions in other languages (McIlveen, 2015b, 2015d); and an objective review (Bayne, 2013). Given its demonstrable utility as a self-assessment exercise for reflexive practice, we conclude by suggesting MCC may be transferred into other educational contexts in which meta-cognitive skills and self-efficacy influence students' engagement in their learning. MCC can facilitate students' generating their own motivational narrative that is affirmatively future-orientated.

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