

Meaning and Mattering in Career Construction: The Case of Elaine

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Life themes are about *mattering*. It may be useful to compare life themes to vocational personality types because their differences may not be self-evident. The essential difference between the two is that themes focus on uniqueness whereas types focus on similarity. For example, RIASEC codes represent an individual's similarity to ideal prototypes. A code of RI means that the individual most resembles the Realistic type and next most resembles the Investigative type. In comparison, career stories portray individuals' unique conceptions of their personalities from their own point of view. The narrative lines are not composed of personality traits; instead lines of need, purpose, and intention draw the self-portrait. Themes reveal why an individual is unique. So, objective types focus on *what* interests and abilities individuals possess, whereas subjective themes focus on *why* these characteristics matter. While types have remarkable stability, life themes may be reconstructed to open new avenues of awareness and understanding. Finally, vocational personality theories concentrate on congruence, that is, fitting workers to work to produce success and satisfaction, whereas life theme theories focus on mattering, that is enabling the workers to use work to produce significance and validation.

Counseling for career construction aims to help clients understand how their life project matters to themselves and to other people. In career construction theory, the theme is what matters in the life story. It consists of what is at stake in that person's life. On the one hand, the theme matters to individuals in that it gives meaning and purpose to their work. It makes them care about what they do. On the other hand, what they do and contribute to society matters to other people. The belief that what they do matters to others is important to self-concept (Marshall, 2001). Recognition from significant others consolidates identity and heightens sense of belonging. Josselson (1994) views this mattering as a relational component of identity—a sense of social meaning and relatedness.

Case Study in Mattering

As I begin counseling for career construction, I concentrate on comprehending and appreciating the life themes in a client's career stories. While much has been written about how to hear the themes in career stories, my favorite technique for identifying life themes is to concentrate on how the individual seeks to turn a preoccupation into an occupation. I look for the core value and listen for the heartbeat of career. To do this I elicit a uniform set of stories from clients by a structured interview called the *Career Style Interview* (Savickas, 1998). I have published a manual for this assessment technique earlier (Savickas, 1998) which practicum students might find useful. The interview is designed to elicit self-defining stories that allow counselors to identify the style that individuals impose on their characters and the thematic unity resulting from etching these styles in the psychosocial matrix of personality in work roles. Data from a *Career Style Interview* also clearly manifest a client's vocational personality type and career adaptability. In several publications I have written about how to use the *Career Style Interview* and presented brief case studies (Savickas, 1988, 1989, 1995a, 1995b, 1997), so I will not belabor that herein. Instead, I will now present a more complete case study, first using the results of a *Career Style Interview* to assess vocational personality type, career adaptability, and life theme and then describing how I used this assessment in counseling to help the client narrate a livable career story that enabled her to make educational and vocational choices and then enact roles that made her feel more complete.

Meeting Elaine

Elaine's mother called me to arrange for career counseling with her daughter. Her mother stated that Elaine had already seen two career counselors but they had not been very good. When I asked what that meant, she explained that they both had failed to convince her daughter to major in biology and go to medical school. I agreed to counsel with Elaine only if Elaine called for an appointment and if I worked with Elaine, not for her mother.

When I first met Elaine she was a 20 year old, full-time college student who said that she could not decide on a major, although her mother urged her to declare pre-med. She lived at home and commuted to campus each day. She guessed she would major in pre-med and go on to medical school but she was unsure of this right now. She reported that she had been to her college counseling center yet now feels more undecided after working with a counselor there. She wants me to help her explore whether medicine is the right choice for her. She has just completed the fall semester of her sophomore year and in the spring must declare her major. She sometimes thinks engineering would be good for her, and she took an engineering class during the fall semester. She thought that maybe chemical engineering would be good, but civil engineering is easier. She has requested information from another college where they have better integrated computers into their chemical engineering curriculum. She was attracted by computers and liked the idea that if she transferred to that college she could live in a dorm. I asked her the questions listed on the *Career Style Interview* form that appears in Table 3. The notes I recorded on the form are presented next.

Career Style Interview with Elaine

How can I be useful to you in constructing your career?

I do not know why I can't choose a major. I need help in making a choice.

Three role models:

Ann of Green Gables = spirit; temper (I hide mine); set goals and goes after them; does what she wants; has integrity; has fun.

Wrinkle in Time = showdown against creatures trying to take over their minds. She thought of ways to stick together and fight them.

Laura, *Little House on the Prairie* = wild ideas of things to do; compete, outdo each other; end up on the ground fighting.

Magazines:

Vogue = fashion

Business Week = the advertising campaigns

Details = men's clothing

Favorite Television Show:

Laverne and Shirley = they did things off the norm, but not getting into trouble

Favorite Book:

The Search of Mary Kay Malloy = it is the story of an Irish girl and her voyage to America by herself.

Hobbies:

Movies. Shop in thrift stores for fashionable clothes. Sewing (cross-stitch) while I watch television so that I do not waste time. You can make what you want, not what other people have. I like to look at the finished product. Talking to people

Favorite Sayings:

"I am curious about things." Curious George

"Do it well" - Parents meant nearly perfect and they checked it. Do it wrong and you have to redo it until it is right.

What were your favorite subjects in school?

Math because you learn the right way to do things and to problem solve for yourself.

I hated history because you studied unimportant facts and dates. I also hated geography because you had to memorize.

Three early recollections with headlines:

#1 Little girl annoyed because she must sit still

Going to Disneyland with grandparents and uncle and his girlfriend. I was in the back of the camper trying to sing and dance for my grandmother. She told me to sit down so I would not get hurt. I got on uncle's girlfriend's nerves by trying to talk to her. Tried to talk but she did not think I should move around at the same time.

#2 Playful girl dreads speaking with relatives

I remember a family reunion at Grandma's (the other one). I was playing an old corn thing with my cousin. I did not know who most of the people were. Grandma made me stop playing and said I had to talk to the people because they knew who I was. Grandma said you kids behave.

#3 Mischievous child has fun at first or dog plan fails

This family that my parents met in England came to visit. I teased their son. He made fun of the curlers in my hair. The boy was chasing me all over the yard. So I ran by my dog where the boy could not get me but he threw a stick and hit me in the eye. His mother and my mother took me in the bedroom and cleaned my eye.

Following the completion of the *Career Style Interview*, I asked Elaine a few questions that occurred to me during that structured interview.

What were the circumstances during which your indecision was labeled?

I was getting bored in my classes. One of my professors noticed and invited me in for an interview. He asked me why I was not sure about engineering. He said that he was not sure when he was in college and he joined the Navy. It made it more real when he said it. He permitted me to acknowledge it and to start to deal with indecision.

How does it feel to be undecided?

It feels okay now that I have accepted it. I am failing at what I should do (make a choice). Floating in space, no direction, all dark.

Of what does this feeling remind you?

Being out of control.

Tell me an incident in which you had this same feeling.

Feeling of uncontrol like when I am when depressed.

Tell me about it.

My girlfriend has way of triggering me. She is too emotional. When she has a fight with her boyfriend, she gets me depressed because of the things she says when she is depressed over relationships. She expresses what I cannot express. When she says it, I end up feeling my feelings.

Do you have any idea of what haunts you?

I am afraid to choose the wrong thing. I could make a wrong choice. Then, I would not live up to other peoples' expectations.

Tell me part of your life story that is important to your career choice.

I was always undecided. In the second grade, I went to get new shoes. After I wore them to school one day, I would take them back and get a different pair. Boy who sat next to me thought I was rich because I had so many pairs of shoes but it was because I could not decide.

Elaine's Vocational Personality, Career Adaptability, and Life Themes

Career construction theory focuses on stories because it views language as the efficient means for building careers out of complex social interactions. Language and stories are construction tools for making meaning. Clients, as they tell their stories, feel that they become more real. The more stories they tell, the more real they become. The more they view their "me," the more they develop their self-concepts. Storytelling crystallizes what they think of themselves. Many clients laugh and cry while telling their stories because they see their life themes emerge in the space between client and counselor. It is important that counselors help client's understand the implications of what they have said in telling

their stories. This means relating the theme to the problems posed in the beginning of the interview. It is also best to use the client's own favorite words (especially those they have used repeatedly) and most dramatic metaphors. At the same time, constructivist counseling expands the language that a client has available to make meaning out of experience. It offers clients the logical language of the RIASEC model as well as the dramatic language of stories and the symbolic language of poetry. Helping clients to enlarge their vocabulary of self increases their ability to story their experience and to understand and communicate who they are and what they seek.

Every counselor can listen to Elaine's stories and hear them through the amplifier of their favorite career theory. A counselor can listen for the melody of self-efficacy (Betz, 2000), the variations of different RIASEC types (Holland, 1997), or the song of career beliefs (Krumboltz & Vosvick, 1996). Nevertheless, it may be useful to demonstrate the interpretive routine used by counselors who try to hear how clients construct their careers. Like everyone else, Elaine's full story would require a novel. So this demonstration will not be exhaustive, or even comprehensive. It will highlight only a few representative incidents in Elaine's story to illustrate seven "tricks of the trade" in counseling for career construction.

First, I begin to make sense of Elaine's stories by reviewing how she wants to use the counseling experience. Her goals frame my analysis of the stories and the counseling to follow. They provide the perspective from which to view the stories. In response to my introductory question "How can I be useful to you in constructing your career?" Elaine had said that she did not know why she cannot choose a major and she would like help in making a choice. This gives us two points of reference. She wants the counselor to help her understand why she cannot choose as well as to move her closer to making a choice. So in reviewing her career stories, I keep on the lookout for her experiences with and views of decision making. I am particularly interested in how decision making relates to her life themes. Of course, I also note that in terms of career adaptability, she may benefit from increasing her sense of career control.

Second, I look for the verbs in her early recollections. I start with the first verb in the first story, having learned that this is a particularly important form of movement in the life of the client. In Elaine's first recollection, the first verb is "going." To me this means that she wants to move, to be on the go, and to travel. I then look in the remaining stories for other evidence to support this idea. I note the phrases "moving around" and "dancing" in the first recollection and I find further support in her favorite book, which tells the story of a girl's journey to another country. Other verbs in her early recollections stand out by their repetition. "Playing" and "singing" seem important to her. She is enthusiastic about life. Also "try" appears three times in the first recollection, suggesting that she is industrious and persistent in pursuing difficult goals. "Talking" appears in the first two recollections, so she likes to communicate. And finally, in the first two recollections adult women tell her to sit down and stop playing. I start to see the tension in her life between wanting to be on the go and being told to sit still. Of course there is much more in her stories yet this is enough to get started. It is important to remember that these memories are not necessarily reasons for her behavior, she has constructed them to reflect her current struggle. The past takes lessons from the present, reshaping itself to fit current needs. This is why career stories, in addition to reflecting the life theme, almost always directly express the central issue now being faced by the client. From the many available stories, each reflecting the same themes, clients tell those that they themselves need to hear.

Third, I look at the headlines Elaine had written for each of her three recollections. These headlines came from my asking her to pretend that each story was going to appear in the newspaper and it needed a catchy headline, one that includes a verb. These headlines are rhetorical compressions that express the gist of her story. From Elaine's point of view, she is a "little girl" who is annoyed because powerful others stop her from enthusiastically pursuing her dreams. They want her to stay put where they place her and she dreads talking to them about her needs. She knows that she can be mischievous and irritate them, yet understands that this negative plan will fail in the long run. It is worthwhile to read these plot lines in two ways. On the one hand, they reveal more about the life theme that will shape her career. On the other hand, they indicate in the here and now the problem she wants to work on in counseling and what she expects from the counselor. She wants a counselor to encourage her movement and her gusto for life, teach her to speak up for herself, and devise a plan that will not fail.

Fourth, I want to understand how Elaine is attempting to solve her problems in constructing a career and how occupations can help her grow up and actively master the problems she has faced. I seek to draw the line from preoccupation to occupation that is implicit in her stories, and that is the essence of the life theme. To do this, I compare the first early recollection to her role models. The early recollection portrays the pain and problem while the role models propose an ego ideal and tentative solution. In Elaine's case, the first story is about a playful girl being told to sit still and do as she is told. This, of course, resonates to her current dilemma--sitting still as her mother tells her to major in pre-med. The sitting still can be her metaphor for indecision.

Fifth, to see the plan she has in mind, I look to who she has chosen as models for self-design. As the architect of her own character, she has selected them as blueprints because they have solved the problems she herself now faces. Elaine has incorporated these key figures as ego ideals, imitated some of their salient behaviors, and now identifies with them. How she describes them reveals key ingredients in her self-concept and articulates her psychosocial identity. More than that, the descriptions serve as goals she has set for herself. In Elaine's stories, the key figures model spirit, enthusiasm, playfulness, goals, competitiveness, persistence, playfulness, temper, fighting wrong-headed authority, and enlisting compatriots in these battles. These qualities are reaffirmed in her other stories. She is not frightened by wild ideas and doing things off the norm as long as they are fun and do not cause trouble. She is curious and definitely an independent problem solver. She is neat and likes to do things well. She enjoys fashion, but maybe in a conventional and business-like way.

Sixth, I profile her career adaptability. After reviewing the coping strategies in her stories, I concluded that she is strongly concerned about the future, shows curiosity about it, and could use a little more confidence in her ability to make it happen-- but this is due more to perfectionistic tendencies than to a lack of self-esteem. The major deficit in the profile, of course, is a healthy sense of career control. Indecision is her "try" at wrestling her mind away from powerful others who want to make it up for her. Ownership of her career is at stake, and she is ready to fight for it now. She just needs a plan and some encouragement. I will start by trying to help Elaine view her indecision as a strength, not a weakness. It is her way of fighting powerful creatures who are trying to control her career.

Seventh, I appraise Elaine's vocational personality. I do this by looking at her stories through the lens of Holland's RIASEC hexagon. Looking through these six-sided lenses, I see that she most resembles the Investigative type (a curious problem solver who likes math and science). She next most resembles the Conventional type (likes teams, partners, caution, cleanliness, norms). In the middle falls resemblance to the Social type (talking, playing with others, taking care of other people). I see less resemblance to the Artistic and Enterprising types, although liking travel, fashion, and adventure suggest their presence. These may be latent traits that will develop more strongly in the future. I see the least resemblance to the Realistic type; actually I see none but there certainly must be a little there. The lack of Realistic characteristics in her career stories seems strange for someone interested in civil engineering (); and, even medicine has Realistic in its code of ISR.

Having gone through my seven-step interpretive routine in a systematic manner, I then summarize my conclusions and prepare to meet the client by doing two last things-- crafting a success formula and composing a life portrait. I aim to craft a first draft of a success formula that a client and I will edit together until the client finds it quite accurate and a little bit inspiring. Success formulas are an integral part of Haldane's (1975) technique of articulating dependable strengths. I recommend his books and materials highly, yet to help practicum students learn to write success formulas, I have devised the handout that appears in Table 4. In writing a success formula for Elaine, a counselor would select one phrase each from the three columns that represent the RIASEC types that she most resembles. Try it yourself. From Investigative, I selected *solve problems*, from Conventional I selected *be part of a team* and from Social I selected *help others*. The first draft of her success formula then became: *You feel happy and successful when you are a part of a team that helps people solve problems*. It could just as easily been *You feel happy and successful when you use logic to provide advice about how to organize things*.

I then move from the success formula to a more comprehensive portrait of the client. I try to draw a life portrait that captures a client's essential character yet lacks the finishing touches that the client

must add during counseling. I start composing the portrait by using my rational mind, yet quickly enrich that logic by drawing upon my intuition. I get in touch with the feelings and interpersonal responses the client has evoked in me. I free associate about how the complex elements in a client's career stories fit the plot line. I daydream about what chapter the client could next write given where the current chapter ends. I think of other people I know who share the client's role models and hobbies in considering how their lives might instruct her.

In composing a life portrait, I aim for an honest portrayal of a client's life as a work in progress, a life that is simultaneously predetermined and unpredictable. The portrait is not the same as a book of life; rather than facts, it presents thematic truth and highlights emotional realities that glue the facts together. It includes tentative answers to implicit questions such as "Who am I?" "What is my quest?" and "How can I grow and flourish?" I emphasize and repeat the life theme, affirming its significance and validity, and use it to unite the meaning of the separate career stories. This emphasis furthers client individuation by integrating the parts and forces that constitute her or him. I do this by imposing narrative structure to construct a view of the self that unites contradictory views, baffling behaviors, and inconsistent stories. Most of all I illuminate the secret that makes the client's life whole. If nothing else, I want the portrait to articulate the controlling idea and ruling passion in the client's life. By clarifying what is at stake and the choices to be made, the life portrait will enhance the client's ability to decide. After I have sketched a portrayal that includes a client's personality type, career adaptability, and life themes, I am ready to engage the client in a conversation about the what, how, and why of his or her life.

I start by reviewing the client's response to my opening inquiry regarding how counseling might be useful to him or her. Then I present the life portrait. I always present the portrait in a way that highlights its developmental trajectory, especially the movement from symptom to strength-- from tension to intention-- so that clients actually feel their own movement from passive suffering to active mastery. In so doing, I act as a story teller in focusing on dramatic movements, always talking about where the client is headed and asserting the client's agency in directing this movement. Occasionally, I pause to act more like a poet by bringing important details into sharp focus by highlighting vivid expressions of the self in a narrative moment. This is analogous to pausing the movie of the client's life to study a single frame or photograph. These pauses in the action are used to reconstruct old meanings in a way that creates new meanings and opens new avenues of movement. I always restate the obvious in the life portrait, and in candid language, because what is not acknowledged grows bigger than it needs to be.

As I present a portrait to the client I remain curious, never certain. Several times I ask the client if I understand things accurately by inquiring, "What am I missing?" The portrait must be presented as a tentative sketch, not the truth. It gets its validity from organizing the particulars of a life into an internally consistent and personally meaningful story. So in the end, the truth of my portrait of a client is arbitrated by its utility to that client.

With Elaine, I started our second meeting by asking her if she had any additional thoughts about her responses during the *Career Style Interview* or if there were any things she wished to add or clarify. Although she did not, many clients do because they continue to think about the questions and conversation in the hours following the first session. I then reminded her of what she had said in response to my inquiry about how I could be useful to her. Elaine had said that she did not know why she cannot choose a major and she would like help in making a choice. She also had mentioned that she wanted to discuss whether medicine would be a good field for her. This gives us three points of reference in viewing her life portrait: why she cannot choose (i.e., career adaptability), how good a fit is medicine (i.e., vocational personality type), and how to move toward making a choice (i.e., life themes).

I then portray her life theme as fighting powerful creatures who are trying to steal her mind, or in this particular instance her career. She is rebelling by sitting still and refusing to decide in their favor while she marshals personal resources and social support to make her own choice. I paused to get her reaction and revisions. We explored her feelings about the portrait, because affect helps to create meaning. We also looked at her strengths, especially the personal characteristics of which she was most proud. We then discussed how the problems she currently faced were really the best solutions that she could come up with so far. For example, I helped Elaine to reconstruct her indecision from being a

problem to it being the best solution she has found so far for trying to fight off the creatures who are stealing her career by making her sit still for what they want. In this way, I attempted to help her use language, especially her own favorite metaphors and verbs, as a means of controlling the situation and increasing feelings of agency.

Having thus addressed Elaine's first concern-- understanding why she cannot make a decision regarding her academic major-- we moved to her second question--how well a career in medicine would suit her. To address this question, we considered her vocational personality and interests, especially how she proposed to use the world to become more whole. Following the psychosocial model, I sought to create and confirm interests, not diagnose them, by concentrating on the inner means and outer ways that she could use to solve herself and position herself in society. We discussed the interests she had formed as being solutions to her problems in growing up. She wants to be independent and on the go, use logic to solve problems, and work as a part of a team. I presented the two different success formulas that I drafted for her and asked which one felt more fitting. She revised them so that after a few minutes she felt pleased with the following success formula: *I feel happy and successful when I am part of a team that uses logic to help people by providing advice about how to solve their problems in an organized way.* Medicine does not seem to fit her plot as well as some other fields. Medicine has a code of ISR, and she does not strongly resemble the Social or the Realistic types. Certainly, she could do medicine but it may not fully incorporate her self-concept.

We then conversed about her desire for a career in which she could use logic to solve structured problems and be part of a team (IC), not solve the ambiguous, physical problems that patients routinely present to their physicians. I commented that if she were to become a physician, she would probably be attracted to the specialty of radiology. We also talked about whether the Realistic colleagues and aspects of engineering jobs really appeal to her. We talked about exploring majors in computer science, mathematics, and finance. Next we looked in the *Occupations Finder* (Holland, 1994) to identify occupations that fit her code and found no occupations listed under ICS and only one listed for CIS, polygraph examiner. Most of all, we talked about discovering a way in which she could flourish and places where self-definition and self-determination would be possible. Having addressed, to her satisfaction, the issue of how well medicine suited her and which other fields merit exploration, we moved on to her third question, which was how to move forward toward choosing a major.

Next, we discussed ways forward from where she now sits, including alternative resolutions and possible selves. Her indecision is not a weakness, it reflects a potential strength that must blossom, in her case probably into a life long decisiveness and talent for solving problems. That life must be full of movement, not sitting. I explained that development arises from activity and overcoming difficulties met in the world. We then engaged in a meaningful conversation about self-construction activities that might make her feel more whole and move her closer to being the person she wanted to be. We conversed about her desire to assert more control over her life and to choose her own major. In preparation for so doing, we talked about possible growth experiences such as working a summer job away from home, moving into a dormitory, taking a workshop on assertiveness, and meeting with a counselor to discuss family issues. She was encouraged by our conversation and actually felt that looking back over her life had given her the ability to move forward and the resolve to do so. We agreed to talk on the phone in the middle of the next semester and meet again during the summer.

When she visited again, the next summer, Elaine reported that she had taken a continuing education course in assertiveness, worked with a college counselor for five sessions to improve her relationship with her parents and reduce her perfectionism, lived away from home while working a summer job as a ticket-taker at an amusement park, and completed elective courses in computer science and accounting. She was leaning toward declaring a major in computer science but wondered if engineering would be a better fit for her. Thinking that she would prefer to explore this ambivalence in an organized way, I invited her to complete the *Incorporation Worksheet*. As we sat together, Elaine rated on a seven-point scale how well the twelve adjectives described first the occupation of a computer specialist, then engineer, and finally herself. These ratings show her construction of the three elements. Although her perceptions may be inaccurate when compared to objective occupational information and

personality inventories, they are the perceptions that guide her behavior. If the ratings had seemed grossly inaccurate, we would have discussed them.

We examined her ratings by first determining a RIASEC code for each element by summing the ratings for the two adjectives that represent each type and then ordering the types. This resulted in a code of ICS for herself, ICA for computer specialist, and IRC for engineer. In terms of RIASEC types, there was a better fit between her and computers than between her and engineering. We then examined how well each occupation incorporated her self-concept by calculating and summing differences between the rating for the two comparisons. The difference between self-ratings and rating for computers was 18 compared to the difference between self-ratings and ratings for engineering, which was 26. Obviously, computers were perceived by Elaine as better incorporating her self-concept. She enjoyed this exercise and felt good about the conclusion she had drawn— to major in computer science.

I next saw Elaine after she graduated with a major in computer sciences. She told me how much she had enjoyed her courses but detested the sexism exhibited by many of her instructors. To combat their bias, she had organized a club for female majors in computer sciences. She was proud of what they had achieved in combating prejudice. She was even more proud of the occupational position that she had recently secured. In two weeks she would begin a job as a systems analyst in a position that required traveling throughout the United States to regional branches of a national firm where she would solve problems that they have with their information technology. Furthermore, Elaine told me that she and her mother were now “friends” and that her mother was proud of her accomplishments and pleased with her prospects. Elaine looked forward to now becoming a woman on the go, one encouraged by a mother who tells her not to sit still when bullies attack her. She glowed as she told me how she had used the things that we had talked about to help her roommates and friends make career choices.

Counselors’ predictions about how Elaine’s career progressed should not be used to evaluate a counselor’s competence. Whether a counselor’s initial “guesses” about the next chapter in Elaine’s career story were right or wrong should never be at issue. What is important is that Elaine’s counselor should be useful to her, not “right.” The counselor would have been useful if she or he helped Elaine understand her career stories; know her vocational personality and preferred work environments; prompted her to become more in control of and confident about her future; helped her compose a success formula; and enabled her to envision and explore possible selves and future scenarios. Clients with career concerns need counselors who help them author their lives, not fortune tellers who make predictions.

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