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## Career Development and Hermeneutical Inquiry Part I: The Framework of a Hermeneutical Approach

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### Abstract

Hermeneutics, the practice of interpretation, has gained increased interest in the social sciences as an alternative form of inquiry. In this, the first of two papers, hermeneutical inquiry is proposed as suitable to the study of several aspects of career counselling, including career as a life-span project, its active and dynamic nature, its social and cultural dimension, and its intentionality and agency. Three specific steps of hermeneutical inquiry are addressed: the recognition of the researcher's initial framework, the identification of the actor's framework, and the construction of the interpretation. Finally, it is argued that the practice of counselling is particularly suited to hermeneutical inquiry.

### Résumé

L'herméneutique, la pratique de l'interprétation, suscite un intérêt croissant dans les sciences sociales comme forme alternative d'investigation. Le présent exposé, le premier d'un travail en deux parties, propose l'investigation herméneutique comme étant particulièrement adéquate pour l'étude de plusieurs aspects d'une carrière, y compris la carrière considéré comme un projet de planification de vie, sa nature active et dynamique, ses dimensions sociales et culturelles, ainsi que l'intentionnalité et l'actualisation que cela suppose. Trois étapes de l'investigation herméneutique sont discutées: l'identification du cadre de référence initial du chercheur, le cadre de l'acteur, la construction de l'interprétation. Finalement, il est discuté que la pratique de counseling se prête particulièrement bien à l'investigation herméneutique.

The definition, investigation and explanation of the concept of career has been acknowledged as complex and ambiguous (e.g., Hesketh, 1985; Watts, 1981). In response to difficulties, researchers of career behaviour have focused on "small scale, specific theories" (Hesketh, 1985). In doing so, they have been able to isolate and describe some specific variables, but have frequently failed to address the complexity that makes up career on the whole. Moreover, because of its narrow focus, research in the career field often lacks immediate meaning and usefulness for counsellors.

The recently suggested use of contextual or ecological metaphors in career development (Collin & Young, 1986; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986; Young, 1984) provides a broad perspective or framework for conceptualizing career in which the multiplicity of variables can be accounted for. For example, in using these metaphors, such dimensions as the reciprocal interaction between individuals and the systems of which they are a part, the manner in which individuals

are producers of their own career development, and the specific cultural and historical environments in which careers develop can be described. Clearly, the methods of inquiry that seek attribution of causes or logical explanations are inadequate to answer all the questions that are generated by this perspective. An alternative framework for understanding career development is found with hermeneutics.

Briefly, hermeneutics is the practice of interpretation. It has attracted recent interest in the social sciences generally (e.g., Bauman, 1978; Casmir, 1983; Taylor, 1971), in psychology (e.g., Freeman, 1984; Manicas & Secord, 1983; Packer, 1985a, 1985b; Polkinghorne, 1983; Sullivan, 1984) and in counselling (Howard, 1986). In hermeneutics, human action is seen to be organized more like a text or a narrative than as a series of causes or logical consequences. Our thesis is that an ecological perspective warrants a hermeneutical approach to research.

In this first part of a two-part series, we describe several distinctive characteristics of the hermeneutical approach, and identify those aspects of career particularly amenable to hermeneutical inquiry. Finally, by relating hermeneutical inquiry to the practice of counselling, we show that the hermeneutical study of career can be meaningful and useful for counsellors. In the subsequent paper, we will examine several career studies (Collin, 1985; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985; Willis, 1977) that, in one way or another, use a hermeneutical approach, and we will demonstrate its procedures, difficulties, and strengths.

#### HERMENEUTICAL INQUIRY

Hermeneutics developed in connection with biblical interpretation in the 17th century. Attempts were made to reconstruct what a text meant to the author at the time it was written. Gradually, hermeneutics extended to help guide the interpretation of other texts and narratives. After considerable development in this century, it has now become a "central topic" (Bleither, 1980, p. 1) in the social sciences, art and language, and literary criticism. Ricoeur's (1971) suggestion that human actions could be considered as analogous to texts and thus the subject of hermeneutical inquiry is of particular relevance to career study.

Hermeneutical inquiry is one of the methodologies appropriate to phenomenological philosophy which, in contrast to positivist philosophy, admits individual consciousness is a proper subject of study. Such study demands interpretation, and this is the essence of hermeneutics. Our starting point is the text, verbal narrative, dialogue, or action that we wish, for some reason, to understand more fully. In the case of ancient texts, the author is not available to us to elucidate what was intended and written and we therefore have to rely upon our own interpretation. There may be as great a need for such interpretation, however, even when the author, narrator, or actor is present or readily available, for

much of human action is ambiguous, or so complex that significant detail may be overlooked, or so embedded in process and context that it calls for interpretation. Sullivan (1984) suggests that in a hermeneutical study we are concerned with what the actor is saying (*relation*) but our inquiry is at sufficient *distance* to be able to restate it or resymbolize it so that something new is brought to our understanding of the situation.

Packer (1985a) contrasts hermeneutics as a paradigm of inquiry with two traditional paradigms used in psychology and the social sciences — empiricism and rationalism. These consider individuals as passive recipients of what happens to them, whereas hermeneutics accepts that the individual largely experiences what happens as teleological and goal-oriented. Experience is more being “pulled” toward which we aim rather than being “pushed” by conditions in our past. Essentially, hermeneutics involves greater complexity and ambiguity than does empiricism or rationalism. Humans are language users and, as such, we are able to monitor our own behaviour. Thus, an individual’s plans, intentions, agency, and reflexivity are dimensions of the individual that are not readily subsumed under other models of inquiry, but can be accessed through hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics can help career researchers and counsellors uncover the ambiguity and complexity that characterizes career phenomena. Alternative efforts, represented largely by the empirical tradition, attempt to simplify career behaviour by seeking “timeless and ahistorical laws” (Packer, 1985a, p. 1088). Hermeneutics, on the other hand, provides a narrative account that is open to the standards of common sense. The narrative addresses the shared understanding of the phenomena between the person researched and others in the context, and includes cultural and historical factors.

### *The Process of Hermeneutical Inquiry*

As well as allowing the admissibility of phenomenological material, hermeneutics adds a framework within which the material will be examined. The process of hermeneutical inquiry is thus an iterative one in which the examination moves between the whole, the parts, and back again. This is referred to as the hermeneutical circle. The process involves three steps.

1. *The recognition of the researcher’s initial framework.* All of us have to make interpretations of ourselves and others constantly in order to engage in social life and, indeed, to be human. However, what we are concerned with here are the interpretations made by the researcher in order to understand the actions of others. Often experts come to the “text” with some understanding that can be used in the interpretation of the account, text or dialogue, perhaps derived from their own participation in, or experience of, that which is to be interpreted. However, the

interpretative framework should be “as free as possible from prior theoretical assumptions, based instead on practical understanding” (Packer, 1985a, p. 1082).

2. *The identification of the actor's framework.* Using clues from the text itself and from their own prior understanding of it, hermeneutical researchers develop a conceptual framework which enables them to understand and account for the text. Sullivan (1984) suggests that the criterion for the framework used in the interpretation is that it must account for the author's or actor's perspective — for example, what did the author intend or how did the actor experience the context in which the action takes place? In admitting these types of data, and using one or other specific frameworks, different interpretations will result.

3. *The construction of an interpretation.* Sullivan (1984) maintains that a social science interpretation has different perspectives from that of the actors. He provides four criteria for an adequate interpretation. The first is that an adequate account is negotiated. The researcher shares and negotiates the interpretation with those whom the account is about, who, in turn, can recognize themselves in that account. The researcher, however, remains the final arbiter. Sullivan's second criterion suggests that an adequate account present itself as an argument. Here the issue is that the interpretation is plausible, and that it is presented as one of several alternatives. Sullivan's third condition of adequate interpretation is that it express the possibility of choice in the individual's socially and historically constructed situation. The explanation should recognize the individual's world as historically constructed, rather than offer explanations in terms of mechanisms or organisms whose lawful order transcends history. The interpretation recognizes the individual's power to transform self. As a final criterion, explanations are expected to be critical and to bring something new to our understanding of the original account: They are more than a “reiteration of the point of view of those interpreted” (p. 149).

#### CAREER ISSUES

Earlier we referred to an ecological perspective which encompasses several dimensions of career not readily investigated with traditional forms of research. This section will discuss how hermeneutics addresses some of these, including its life-span nature, the intentional aspects of the individual's plans and goals, the dynamic and active nature of career, and the specific cultural and historical environments in which careers develop. Simply put, whoever lives out a career creates a text. The following dimensions of career lend themselves to the metaphor of text. They also lend themselves to hermeneutics and to counselling as a means of personal “meaning making,” to use Kegan's (1982) phrase.

### *The Life-span Project*

Career has increasingly been recognized as a life-span project (Super, 1980). Phenomena such as midlife transition (Levison, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), dual career couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), mid-career change (Collin, 1985), and career issues among the aged (Parnes, 1981) are all indicative that the concept of career is not limited to adolescent and early adult development. Nor can career be conceptualized as a series of discrete steps, but rather, as Super suggests, as a series of events that extend across a lifetime.

Super (1976) made an important contribution to our understanding of what a career is when he described its subjective and teleological characteristics in the phrase, "they (careers) exist only as people pursue them" (p. 4). The subjective dimension of career has been taken up by Collin (1985). Both definitions represent an attempt to answer the question of meaning or significance.

At any one moment, a career behaviour may seem meaningless unless tied to both a past and a future. This sequence of events is experienced by the individual as a narrative or story through time. But it is this sense of how the individual experiences his or her career that changes the focus from considering discrete behaviours to considering retrospective and intentional actions. My experience of my career is the story that I can tell about the past and the story (plan) I have about the future.

Gergen and Gergen (1984) point out that narrative is capable of generating directionality among a series of otherwise isolated events. The narrative actually structures events in such a way that the events demonstrate a connectedness and a sense of movement through time. Gergen and Gergen suggested that successful narratives are characterized by the establishment of a goal state or valued end point, and the selection and arrangement of preceding events in such a way as to render the goal state probable (p. 175). What is unique about narrative or life stories is that they reveal the past-in-the-present. They are not a simple ordering of past events, which doubtless have been influenced by memory, but a search for a meaning, theme, or pattern.

### *Intentionality and Agency*

Intentionality and agency represent a second dimension of career that invites the use of hermeneutics. Intentionality refers to the goal-directed nature of much of career behaviour. Agency suggests that individuals conceive themselves as making and acting upon their own decisions. Both are subject to interpretation — data or material must be gathered and understood.

Earlier, we added the word *project* to Super's life-span conceptualization. This connotes the self's definition of identity and the intentional futurity as well as the molar characteristic of human action. In Sullivan's

(1984) view, we are defined by our projects. The life-span project that emerges out of narrative is not a simple series of career events. Inasmuch as an individual is able to tell a narrative, this represents an awareness of oneself, the links between events that are oriented toward goals, and the capabilities that the person has to reach goals. Much of what is proper to the study of career deals with deliberate action directed toward certain ends. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) terms, career is more typically involved with molar rather than molecular behaviour, that is, behaviour that is goal-directed and relatively resistant to distraction.

### *The Dynamic and Active Nature of Career*

The essence of career is action, not so much reasoning or attitudes. We do not deal with hypothetical events, but real ones implemented in a complexity of systems. Although career is acted out and acted on every day, many career studies have isolated some aspect of it to relatively specific constructs, for example, occupational choice, aspiration, or decision-making.

The very activeness of career is a further reason for hermeneutical inquiry because hermeneutics requires actual rather than hypothetical data, that is, stories of past events rather than reasoning about future ones. Or in the case of the latter, the "reasoning" should be understood in the past and present contexts. Hermeneutics can involve the collection of data by observation in actual settings, by interview, by written account, or by audio or video recording, but it has to represent actual events in which the subject is involved.

### *Social and Cultural Dimensions of Career*

Another dimension of career that encourages us to consider hermeneutics as a mode of inquiry is that career is culturally based. The well documented (e.g., Blau & Duncan, 1967) and pervasive influence of socioeconomic class on occupational aspiration is but one leg of the argument that individuals develop not in isolation but within a social context. Historical events, such as war and peace, economic depression, and world markets influence career greatly. Our view, however, is that individuals make sense of career through social interaction. We suggest that culture is constituted partially by shared meanings which result from interpretative processes involving social interaction. This involves a relationship between shared understanding and social interaction.

Career as a cultural phenomenon has come to represent not only how individuals will participate in the broad society, but what portion of its wealth, prestige and other benefits they will receive. It is also founded on the notion that the sense we make of our career is derived from the mutually shared understanding as developed through social interaction.

## THE PRACTICE OF COUNSELLING

Essentially, hermeneutics accords an important role to the actors and demands sensitivity and an ability to listen closely to them. Hermeneutics thus shares with the practice of counselling the interview as an important vehicle in gathering material (Freeman, 1984). Collin and Young (1986) drew parallels between hermeneutics and the conditions of counselling — empathy, respect and positive regard. Howard (1986) suggested that counselling practitioners, in getting to know their clients, act like historians getting to know a particular person or event.

More particularly, however, career counselling involves the construction and the telling of a life story that focuses on both the past and the future. As counsellors, we attempt to help clients establish meaning for themselves by understanding the life stance they have adopted or would like to adopt. What actually happens in counselling is the client comes to understand, and subsequently act on, plans and beliefs as well as previous action.

Counsellors can readily recognize the narrative nature of clinical material. Most clients experience and recount career and life events as narrative, that is, accounts are made in relation to a goal, for example, “my failure to gain employment,” and by selecting and arranging events in relation to that goal. Counsellors will recognize that both past and anticipated events may be selected in the second step of the narrative — “My decision to drop out of university is part of the problem” and/or “I don’t think that I will be able to project enough confidence in the job interview.” It needs to be acknowledged that, by virtue of what they do on a daily basis, counselling practitioners are engaged in a form of hermeneutical inquiry.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that hermeneutical inquiry is appropriate in the career counselling field. Several salient career characteristics can more fully be examined from a hermeneutical perspective than from traditional forms of inquiry. In spite of the strong argument that can be made in its favour, there are few studies in the career domain that actually use hermeneutical methods and fewer still that are explicitly labeled hermeneutical. A subsequent paper will address this deficit by identifying procedures in undertaking hermeneutical research and illustrating these procedures with reference to specific career studies.



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