

My Career Chapter: The Dialogical Self as Author and Editor of a Career Autobiography

Michael Healy and Peter McIlveen

My Career Chapter: a Dialogical Autobiography (MCC; McIlveen; 2015) is a qualitative career assessment and counselling tool based on the *systems theory framework* (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014) and *dialogical self theory* (DST; Meijers & Hermans, 2017). MCC leads the client through a reflective writing process based on their internal dialogues about their career and helps the client to edit the resulting manuscript into a productive and empowering narrative. MCC's theoretically informed practical features may be used to develop the reflective capacity of the client beyond the end of the counselling event, promoting lifelong learning, informed self-judgment, and improved self-regulation. This chapter describes the theoretical foundations of MCC and its application in a case vignette.

The Systems Theory Framework

The STF (Patton & McMahon, 2014) is a framework that organizes the myriad influences that constitute a person's career. The STF positions the individual in the context of three layers of systems: the *individual system* of physical, cognitive, and psychological traits; the *social system* of primary social groups; and the *environmental-societal system* of broader political, economic, and historical factors. Furthermore, the STF describes the individual and their systems of influences as recursive (i.e., each repeatedly affecting the other), changing over time, and subject to the often profound effects of chance. The STF represents a holistic view of career development, which is informed by—and has in turn informed further development of—constructivist approaches to career development.

Dialogical Self Theory

DST frames the self not as a single unified entity but as a *society of mind* comprising a multiplicity of *I-positions* in dialogue with each other (Meijers & Hermans, 2017). An apt metaphor for the self is as a quarrelsome political forum, with all its debate, dissension, factionalism, and rhetorical sparring. In DST, each voice in the political forum is an I-position. Thus, a person can simultaneously hold different I-positions, each endowed with a voice, a role to play, or a perspective to argue for. An I-position describes a singular point of view within the multitudinous self, experienced in its relation to other I-positions and the real or imagined positions of external others. I-positions are subject to change in a dynamic process of positioning and repositioning in relation to others. It is the dialogue between I-positions that is the central focus of DST.

In times of difficulty, when I-positions conflict with or oppose each other, dialogues between I-positions may express self-crisis or self-criticism. Anxiety emanates from dialogical conversations focused on self-doubt and failure, and depression arises from dialogical conversations about worthlessness and hopelessness about the future. I-positions talk with one another, judge one another, and feel the sting of cruel words shouted or mumbled at one another out of fear, pain, and anger. The clinical process of identifying and articulating I-positions, before organizing, confronting, and making efforts to integrate them, can be a vehicle for self-regulation, learning, and healing (Meijers & Hermans, 2017).

DST conceptualizes several kinds of supportive I-positions and dialogues (Meijers & Hermans, 2017):

- *Meta-positions* take an overarching position at some distance from the discrete I-positions that they encapsulate, to recognize and organize them and evaluate their credence and cohesion for the future development of the self.
- *Third-positions* emerge when two or more conflicting I-positions are reconciled into a new position that accommodates key aspects of both, rather than one gaining dominance.
- *Promoter positions* integrate, give direction to, and inspire innovation in diverse communities of I-positions.

Thus, meta-positions, third positions, and promoter positions act as mediators and leaders in the “democratic organization of the self” (Meijers & Hermans, 2017, p. 12).

My Career Chapter

MCC integrates the STF and DST in a single, practical career assessment and counselling tool. MCC consists of a workbook, in print or electronic format, which guides the client through a reflective writing process designed to elicit a *dialogical autobiography* cowritten by the client’s own I-positions and edited by helpful meta- and promoter positions.

Steps 1 and 2 of MCC consist of “warm-up” questions and a general description of the internal and external influences from the STF. These steps are intended to build rapport and establish the working alliance between the client and the counsellor, activate the client’s career thought and vocabulary, and *de-centre* the notion of career. De-centring career means to consider career not as a narrowly bounded product of skills and interests that inform a career decision, but rather as a dynamic factor in the client’s relationship with the world, both affected by and affecting myriad interpersonal, social, and cultural influences that operate in their life (McIlveen, 2015).

In Step 3, the client examines a compatibility matrix of career influences (see Figure 1). The internal influences are listed in the first column and the external influences in the first row. Moving across each row, the client considers how compatible or incompatible each internal influence is with each external influence. In doing so, the client continues to de-centre career by seeing and evaluating the distances among influences identified in the STF. Simultaneously, the client is identifying and naming the I-positions that they feel are helping or hindering their career development.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Step 4 gives voice to those I-positions, as the client begins writing their dialogical autobiography by completing 24 sets of five sentence stems. Each set corresponds to one influence from the STF and consists of: one stem in each of the past, present, and future tenses; one stem that evokes emotion; and one stem that evaluates the impact of the influence (see Figure 2). Each sentence stem elicits the expression of an I-position defined by its relation to one or more STF influences. The client may choose to complete two versions of a single sentence, to give voice to competing I-positions.

FIGURE 2 HERE

The fifth step of MCC is crucial. In it, the client is encouraged to adopt the voice of their self from 5 years previous and read the sentences written in Step 4 aloud. Then, the client is invited to adopt the meta-position of editor and to consider and respond to the assertions voiced by the client's I-positions in Step 4. Thus, MCC leads the client to voice a dialogue between two meta-positions: the "younger-self" and the "self-as-editor." It is an important process feature of MCC that the client reads and hears the story aloud, because doing so engages the client in self-

reflection, as an experience of speaking to, listening to, and hearing oneself. This process of writing, reading, and hearing can be insightful for the client.

The sixth and final step elicits further meta- and promoter positions from the client. Here, the client is invited to summarize the manuscript by completing a further three sets of sentence stems, this time focused on the client's strengths, obstacles, and future. The client has now revised their initial stories with the benefit of greater emotional distance, evaluative perspective, and future orientation afforded by the conscious adoption of meta- and promoter positions.

After the client has completed the six steps in writing and summarizing their MCC manuscript, it is recommended that they share it with the counsellor as the basis for further discussion. The counsellor reads the manuscript aloud to the client, to allow the client to further reflect on what is written. Reading aloud is important because the client can now hear the story spoken in the voice of another person, which can be a source of further reflection and consideration. The dialogue between the client and counsellor in response to the client's autobiography is the grist of telling, retelling, and, ultimately, rewriting the client's career autobiography for their reflection and inspiration.

MCC as Career Writing

MCC is an exemplar of *career writing* (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Lengelle & Meijers, 2015), which is an approach to career counselling and education that uses creative, reflective, and expressive writing exercises to help clients explore their professional identities and navigate difficult boundary experiences. In a *boundary experience*, a person is confronted by a situation that tests the limits of their understandings of their self and their place in their social and environmental systems (Healy, McIlveen, & Hammer, 2017; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In boundary experiences, self-critical and self-conflict dialogues prevail, resulting in unhelpful *first*

stories which are characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, dissatisfaction, or hopelessness (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). The goal of career writing is to help the client confront the unhelpful I-positions in their first story and, by giving voice to meta- and promoter positions, re-author them into more productive second stories.

In career writing, client and counsellor collaborate to tell the story. They begin by considering alternative perspectives before iteratively rewriting and retelling the story. The emerging narrative inspires the client to enact the next chapter of their story. This process is a model sequence for career writing exercises and is reflected in the structure of MCC (Healy et al., 2017). MCC is an exemplar of good career counselling and education practice, as described by the critical ingredients of career interventions evident in meta-analytic studies of the effectiveness of career interventions (Whiston, Li, Goodrich Mitts, & Wright, 2017):

1. written exercises,
2. individualized feedback and interpretation,
3. world of work,
4. modelling by competent others,
5. support from social networks,
6. counsellor support,
7. values clarification, and
8. psychoeducation, or explicitly addressing the cognitive processes of making and working toward decisions.

MCC inherently contains all ingredients except 3 and 5. It does not preclude any critical ingredient and can easily be adapted to explicitly include all others.

Case Vignette

Maryann (pseudonym) is a 25-year-old woman who presented for counselling to resolve her anxiety about returning to work in the human resources department of a large, prestigious consulting firm. She had been on medical leave for 3 months to recover from a shoulder injury caused by her attempting to move a heavy filing cabinet. The referral from her medical practitioner stated that the shoulder had fully healed but that she could expect to experience some recurrent pain if the shoulder were to be fatigued or strained. Maryann stated that she was so anxious about returning to work that she had considered resigning instead.

Maryann presented as a well-kempt person who appeared her stated age. She was articulate and soft-spoken, and her affect was congruent with her anxious mood, as evidenced by her tremulous voice and flushed face. Her stiff posture and movement indicated that she was guarding her shoulder. Maryann's cognition and perception were without obvious abnormality and she posed no risk to herself or others. Her thoughts were focused on the urgency of returning to work because of financial pressures and because of the fear that her colleagues may think negatively of her and accuse her of malingering to get time off work. Maryann appeared to understand that her anxiety was related to her conflicted feelings about her workmates' impressions of her but also to the fact that she had no clear strategy to manage the conflict within herself.

Analysis of the Case Vignette

In her initial interview, Maryann shared a history of high achievement in sport, education, and work. Maryann reported that she had won several medals in freestyle swimming at the state level. After graduating from university, Maryann was recruited to a prestigious graduate employment program with a large consulting firm. After completing the graduate program,

Maryann accepted a role with her current employer, where she was injured. Maryann stated that she enjoyed her work but complained that her colleagues competed for the manager's praise, were critical of one another, and were jealous of her experience in a prestigious graduate program. In this session, Maryann was able to de-centre career to recognize the salience of her history of individual success in a range of competitive pursuits, including sport, to her current anxiety about returning to the workplace.

Maryann agreed to continue counselling after the initial assessment interview and completed MCC before her next appointment. When she was asked to describe the experience of completing MCC and whether she had encountered any surprises or gained new perspectives as a result of writing her story and reading it aloud to herself, Maryann burst into tears and exclaimed loudly that she hated her colleagues because they were the cause of her injury. It transpired that Maryann had moved the filing cabinet by herself because she had not wanted to ask her colleagues to assist her. She was angry at herself for not asking for help, but also angry because she believed there was no point in asking for help—her colleagues would not help in any case. Maryann voiced the I-position of “other-worker,” quoting utterances spoken only in Maryann’s *dialogical self*, to deride her request for help and sarcastically comment on her reputation for excellence, which had wounded the pride of the “achiever” I-position—“*I’ll do it without you*”—and motivated her stubborn effort to move the filing cabinet herself. The remainder of the session addressed the thoughts that were generating her anger at herself and her colleagues.

In the subsequent session, the counsellor read Maryann’s MCC manuscript aloud and paused occasionally to invite her to talk more about topics that seemed related to the presenting problems of anxiety and not wanting to return to work, and about Maryann’s anger at herself and her colleagues for the injury. The counsellor noted that the manuscript Maryann produced

focused a lot on succeeding in life but doing so independently, such as in swimming, an individual rather than team sport. The counsellor queried what the younger Maryann had said when Maryann read the manuscript aloud to herself. Maryann's "younger-self" I-position had said she should not be too hard on herself; *"after all, you were trying to be your best."* The younger Maryann had also said that Maryann's manager reminded her of *"Mum, always telling us to be our best and have a go,"* ideals which were great motivators for swimming and studying. The counsellor asked Maryann, *"If you were your mother, what would you say to yourself about moving the filing cabinet?"* Maryann tearfully gave voice to the "mother" I-position: *"I would say 'You have disappointed me, Maryann. You should have asked for help when you realized it was too heavy for one person.'"* Maryann gave a similar answer in response to the counsellor asking her to imagine her manager's advice, reflecting a further I-position ("manager") and potentially allowing a meta- or promoter position—combining the support and encouragement of her mother and manager—to emerge.

Further counselling then focused on Maryann's expectations of herself and the expectations that she imagines other people have of her. Maryann returned to work and kept a diary in which she voiced the various I-positions active in her dialogical self and made efforts to uncover and empower meta-, third-, and promoter positions. In doing so, Maryann began to author a productive second story focused on healing, growth, and becoming more comfortable in her work community.

Summary and Conclusion

MCC is a narrative career-assessment and counselling tool which uses the theories of STF to de-centre career and invite the client to consider influences on their career, and DST to give voice to the I-positions that exist as a result of those influences, confronting the unhelpful

positions and encouraging the helpful. MCC can be used in individual counselling, as described here, but can also be used to good effect in group counselling or career education courses (Healy et al., 2017). It is an exemplar of a career writing activity, well-founded in theory and evidence, that has the potential to promote true transformational learning for the client.

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Biographies

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Practice Points for My Career Chapter (MCC)

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1. **Download the MCC workbook.** *My Career Chapter* is available in English at <https://eprints.usq.edu.au/23797/> and in Chinese at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283663464_My_Career_Chapter_A_Dialogical_Autobiography_Chinese_Version
2. **Download the MCC counsellor's guide.** The *Career Systems Interview & My Career Chapter: Counsellors Guide* is available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324834228_Career_Systems_Interview_My_Career_Chapter_Counsellors_Guide
3. **MCC can be used with groups.** MCC can be used in individual career counselling or in group counselling or career education workshops. In group settings, there are added opportunities for peer feedback and social support.
4. **Integrate MCC.** MCC should be integrated with an initial counselling interview and assessment, such as the Career Systems Interview or a preparatory career education lesson.
5. **De-centre the client's view of career.** In the initial counselling interview or career education lesson, de-centre the notion of career, to orient the client toward examining the influences of the many systems that they inhabit.
6. **Responding to and summarising the MCC manuscript is key.** The crucial stages of MCC are step five and six, in which the client reads the manuscript to, and hears the response of, their "younger self I-position" before writing a final summary. Leaving it undone may allow unhelpful I-positions to remain unchallenged and conflict between I-positions unmediated.

	Workplace	Peers	Family	Community & Social Life	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 1. The compatibility matrix showing internal influences in the first column and external influences in the first row.

Culture
My cultural background has given me...
I am...
Other cultures could help my career by...
I mostly feel very positive / positive / indifferent / negative / very negative in relation to my cultural background because...
My cultural heritage has a very positive / positive / neutral / negative / very negative impact upon my career/life because...

Figure 2. Excerpt from Step 4 of MCC showing the sentence stems for one career influence.