

Richard A. Young · José F. Domene  
Ladislav Valach *Editors*

# Counseling and Action

Toward Life-Enhancing Work,  
Relationships, and Identity

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Richard A. Young  
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# Chapter 1

## Counseling and Action

Richard A. Young, José F. Domene and Ladislav Valach

Counseling is an action. It has a goal and develops goals. It occurs in time and space. It involves the conscious and unconscious behavior of both clients and counselors. It depends on their internal and external resources such as their ability to communicate with each other, having a place where counseling occurs, and a program in which it is lodged. Counseling also involves both counselors and clients taking steps together to realize the goals they have for it. They steer, control, and regulate their joint and individual actions by communication and cognitive and affective processes. Finally, from both the counselor's and the client's individual and shared perspectives, counseling is jointly motivated through their negotiation of goals. Thus, counseling is full of action. It is an action, it is about action, and it emerges from action and leads to action. Action is the very fabric of counseling.

### Action and Counseling: Traditional Views

Traditionally counseling and counseling psychology have not been very explicit about action, although it has been and remains important to these disciplines. For example, it is not a term Feltham and Dryden (1993) defined in their dictionary of counseling. It is included as a term neither in the fourth edition of the *Handbook of Counseling Psychology* (Brown and Lent 2008) nor in the more recent *Oxford Handbook of Counseling Psychology* (Altmaier and Hansen 2011). It does not appear in the definition of counseling psychology recently adopted by the Canadian

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Psychological Association (Bedi et al. 2011) or in the definition of the profession previously developed by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association 1999). Action has been so obvious and taken-for-granted in the counseling literature that only seldom have authors reflected on it in depth (e.g., Howard 1984) and virtually never have they offered an explicit conceptualization of it. Where the term action is used in this literature, it often refers to something that counseling serves to prepare clients for. To counsel often meant to help a client come to a direction or decision relative to an action. For example, in tradition of social cognitive theory, action is understood as execution of cognitive processes (Bandura 1986). In the counseling literature, for example, Hill and O'Brien (1999) in their introductory text suggest that action is the final stage of counseling that is based on prior stages of exploration and insight. Many authors continue to recognize that action is an important component of counseling, most frequently as a result of counseling or characteristic of some final phase. Egan (2007), for example, is particularly articulate in proposing action as a counseling outcome and has identified counselor skills to facilitate client action. Yes, the client's action is an outcome of counseling. Because of the pervading notion that action follows from counseling, but not part of the counseling process, one can see how counseling came to be understood as a kind of preparatory stage for action in which the problems are articulated, self-insight is gained, information transmitted and processed, and so forth. However, that is not the only understanding of action and counseling. Counseling and action involve much more than considering action as a kind of final stage or outcome behavior to which counseling contributes. Indeed, to relegate action simply to what may happen following counseling may be to substantially undervalue its primacy in counseling itself, as we and others argue in this book.

Although practicing counselors may not use the term *action* often, they may have a different view of action and counseling than the ones represented in traditional counseling texts. Counselors, like people generally, attribute their own and others' behavior as goal-directed (Vallacher 1987). They organize their own engagement in counseling as directed toward certain goals. For example, in the client-counselor encounter, the counselor is aware of or asks herself, "what does the client want to communicate? What does he want to hear? What feelings does he want me to understand?" These examples can be multiplied a hundredfold in every aspect of the counselor's work. In effect, the counselor is using a naïve theory of action (Heider 1958), more recently referred to as a theory of mind (Paal and Bereczkei 2007; Tomasello et al. 2005). However, it is not only how the counselors make sense of their own their clients' behavior that is important. Clients are also constructing their current behavior as goal-directed and their lives as a series of goal-directed actions. This way of thinking on the part of clients and counselors is particularly important as a starting point for the book that follows. While the naïve theory of action to some extent captures what is going on in the client-counselor encounter, a much fuller and more explicit understanding of action in counseling is needed if its full potential is to be realized. Counselors want to understand both the complexity of what is happening between themselves and their clients and the actions in which clients are engaging in their lives. Such complexity demands a framework that reflects these phenomena fully.

The purpose of this book is to elaborate on the complex and important role that action has in counseling. It addresses not only the significant issue of the actions that clients take as a result of counseling, but also, importantly, how counseling itself is an action process. Furthermore, it connects the actions prior to, during and after counseling to important life projects and careers that can be life-enhancing, or that could be life defeating without counseling.

## The Challenges of Counseling and Action

The challenge of considering counseling and action is embedded in some fundamental issues in psychology, society, and how professionals intervene in people's lives. The counseling literature has recognized the significant conditions and social changes that our society has undergone in recent decades, including globalization, economic turbulence, regional wars and conflicts, technology development, significant migration of refugees and other migrants, and so forth (e.g., Moodley et al. 2013; Yakushko and Morgan 2012). At the same time, developments in counseling brought about by new research, the global expansion of the field, an increase in the range of applications for counseling practice, broad societal expectations of its important role in addressing social problems, and increased sophistication of methods and models of counseling have pointed to the complexity of counseling.

The disciplines of counseling and counseling psychology have been scrutinized and critiqued on a range of issues. Some critiques have been epistemological, some concerned the relationship between theory and practice, others complained about the conceptual antiquity of counseling theories, and still others pointed to the social change counseling failed to mirror (e.g., Murdock et al. 2012; Scheel et al. 2011; Vera and Speight 2003). There have also been numerous attempts to introduce to counseling relevant concepts from other disciplines such as feminism, developmental psychology, general and social psychology, and cultural anthropology (e.g., Gielen et al. 2008; LaFromboise et al. 1993; Yoder et al. 2012; Suzuki et al. 2005). It became clear that a contemporary approach to counseling would have to develop from a dialogue with these approaches and by learning from them.

Matching these social changes, in the last 30 years there has been a creative explosion in formulating new approaches to counseling (e.g., Gold 2010; Monk et al. 2008; Nelson 2010). Some of these approaches are characterized by specific innovations, for example, narrative, relational, and emotionally focused therapies; others are considered comprehensive approaches, for example, systems theory. Rather than being simply another way of doing things, another counseling manual, approaches such as narrative, relational, and emotionally focused represent important new ways to frame and understand counseling in the context of the complexity of people's lives and changing conditions.

Counseling and counseling psychology can be challenged because of their conceptual framework. Historically, counseling psychology had differentiated itself from clinical psychology by focusing on difficult but typical life concerns and

issues rather than psychopathology. This differentiation led counseling psychology to posit human development as one of its underlying conceptual frameworks. But counseling psychology involves much more than is addressed in developmental psychology. Developmental psychology as a conceptual framework for counseling psychology has been supplemented in recent years by multicultural (e.g., Hansen 2010), relational-cultural (e.g., Jordan 2001), and other critical perspectives, as well as attention to social justice as a guiding framework for practice (e.g., Prilleltensky and Nelson 2002). Similarly, counseling and counseling psychology are much indebted to vocational and career psychology in which everyday life issues, of which work is the major part, have been discussed, conceptualized, and analyzed. Despite the importance of everyday work, it cannot provide a blueprint for the many other activities in which individuals engage. This challenge has been recognized and addressed (e.g., Blustein 2006; Richardson 2012).

These significant social developments in counseling psychology point to the need for an inclusive conceptual framework that can speak simultaneously to context and the person within context. The authors of this book invite us to consider action as such a framework. Action is meaningful in various contexts and among different language groups and reflects the social construction of many of these perspectives.

In the first section of this book, the authors concentrate on a number of important issues and ways they have been recently conceptualized, namely, relationship, constructivism, intentionality, systems, values, culture, emotion, and identity. These issues are central to current counseling theory and practice. They are also issues that counselors cannot but address on a daily basis. The authors of the chapters in Part I recognize that new, more sophisticated frameworks are needed to adequately respond to changing social conditions, new knowledge, and different expectations for counseling. In addition, each author provides an important and different discussion relevant to contextual action theory—the theory we describe and comment on in the second part of this book. Each chapter in Part I implicitly points to contextual action theory as a comprehensive conceptual framework for counseling practice. Further development in counseling suggests their integration in light of action and action theory. These eight issues are briefly introduced in the following.

## ***Relation***

In planning, seeking, engaging in, and experiencing counseling, be it as a client or counselor, one is relating to another person. This relating implies communicating and interacting with the other person and thus implicitly formulating an understanding of intentional reciprocal behavior. Current developments in various disciplines allows us to see such an encounter in relational terms that is, not simply as a meeting of two individuals but as a relationship, a relating (e.g., Gergen 2009b). This important theoretical innovation reaches far beyond the situation of a personal encounter in its application. The physical and social world is not defined as a universe of objects but of relationships (ontology); the process of gaining knowledge is not

understood as mirroring an external reality that exists outside the mind but as a process of relating (epistemology). Consequently, contemporary counseling theory and practice need to consider these views, incorporate them into its conceptual framework, and implement them in counseling practice, especially in light of the centrality of the therapeutic relationship.

## *Constructivism*

Constructivism and constructionism are terms that have become increasingly more common in counseling. Our worlds, our individual and social lives are no longer considered givens to be uncovered, as if they are preexisting artifacts waiting for the archeologist's trowel and pick axe. Constructivism, which has permeated disciplines ranging from quantum physics to art and architecture, suggests that people are active in engaging in their worlds and constructing it as they engage in it. The relating that we described above is about something. New realities are not solely coincidental sediments of interacting, exchanging, and relating. They are new constructions, results of the process of constructing. It has been recognized that this process is more than the instrumental building or assemblage while handling material objects (Berger and Luckman 1966). It has also been suggested that constructing is the core process of our existence and whatever we do, we engage in a process of constructing (Gergen 2009; Searle 1995). Constructionism is important for counseling theory and practice. Clients in counseling are engaged in constructing processes while in counseling and in their lives outside of counseling.

When the relational and constructivist views are linked, counselors are able to implement the concept of relational construction instead of "providing information," "using counseling skills," or "finding an occupation suited the personality of the client."

## *Identity*

There is no doubt of the importance of identity for the understanding and practice of counseling, indeed to Western psychology generally. For example, it has been integrally involved in the development of adolescence and the transition to adulthood (e.g., Erikson 1963, 1968). It is also seen as important to all phases of life. It is a construct that is particularly important in counseling because many life problems have been conceptualized around issues of identity and the self. For example, there is an ever-increasing literature on the development of bi-cultural identity (e.g., Ellis and Chen 2013; Saad et al. 2013). Even more to the point is the claim of Hermans and Dimaggio (2007) that, irrespective of issues of migration, in this modern society youth are faced with the struggle of bi-cultural identity formation in the context of global and the local cultures. Thus, we are confronted with the conflict between the general traditional belief that identities are stable and operate as a determinant

of one's behavior, on the one hand, and the realization, that identities are striven for, goal-directed processes, being developed in the ongoing life of a person in an active way and do not only serve as a depository for or sedimentation of experiences.

## *Systems*

Counselors are the first to recognize the impact of the considerable range of influences on people's lives and on the counseling process itself. However, they are challenged by how to address these multiple sources of influence. In the middle of the twentieth century, biological processes and individual and social processes were conceptualized as systems (e.g., Mead 1934; Parsons 1949; Von Bertalanffy 1975). A system and its environment contain a number of well-defined processes conceptualized in a complex relationship to each other. It allows for the integration of empirically evaluated and theoretically postulated functions and structures in a process order that can serve as complex hypotheses when applied to specific target processes such as joint behavior or counseling processes. Conceptualizing clients as persons existing within an individual social system, and attending to the nature of that system provides a viable way for counselors to explore the important influences in their clients' lives. Thus, the time of studying isolated variables is being replaced by research strategies utilizing complex and differentiated modeling of the target processes. Contemporary counseling theory cannot ignore these strategies.

## *Intentionality*

Western culture is replete with the language of intentionality. The legal system, our relationship with others, our sense of responsibility, and agency and morality are all grounded on an understanding of intentionality. Counseling is also full of intentionality, but it is not limited to, for example, a client's claim, "I intend to give up my dependence on drugs" or "I intend to become an opera singer." Indeed, these examples are not as critical in counseling as the intention of the present moment, represented, for example, in the question a counselor asks herself cited above, "What does the client want to hear?" There is also the issue of the joint intentionality that is generated between the counselor and client in response to the question, "What is what we are doing about?" Counseling at least implicitly assumes that processes such as engaging in counseling and constructing one's family life are intentional processes. However, it is less clear on how intentions arise, and their relation to action. Do our intentions follow our actions? In devising a counseling theory and procedures, it is important to go beyond the concept of intentionality in popular discourse. Its historical context and current development in philosophy, psychology, and social sciences can assist in understanding its meaning and importance. In the recent development of counseling there have been several attempts made to systematically include intentional thinking in theorizing and practice.



## ***Culture***

Intentionally constructing relational systems in counseling and in work, family, and social life does not occur in a vacuum. Culture provides the content and context of these activities (e.g., Markova 2012). In the past, counseling theories often took the cultural embedding and roots of their work for granted, as these were considered unchangeable and definitely ordered. Counseling practitioners always have the challenge of being in and constructing the culture of the present moment, although they may have been less aware of this process as active cultural construction. However, for theorists and practitioners, culture, and specifically multi-cultural counseling have become central to the counseling enterprise (e.g., Comas-Diaz 2012; Fouad and Arredondo 2007; Pedersen et al. 2008). These and other authors have suggested that culture should be observed and considered in counseling; that it is more than a number of language bound behavioral patterns. Instead, culture has been conceptualized as an ongoing process that impacts actions, is constructed by actions, and is realized by and in actions (Boesch 2012). These actions are individual as well as joint; they are actions in projects as well as in careers. Thus, the challenge for counseling and counseling psychology is to be knowledgeable of the traditions that study culture not only comparatively but also in the process of culture making and changing in our everyday lives.

## ***Values***

The relational, constructionist, and intentional system embedded in a larger cultural context described heretofore might give counselors enough instrumental power to achieve specific goals with their clients. However, there is still no guarantee that this power will be used for the betterment and well being of people, humanity, and our world. Thus, it has been suggested that, in their practice, counselors adhere to certain values in regards to their goals and means and assumptions about their image of a person (Cooper 2009). Values do not solely guide the counselors' personal behavior; they also guide the conceptual and practical decisions in their work. For example, the notions of the respectable, goal-directed human being, of equality among people, and particularly between clients and professionals, are value driven. They are values to which counselors can adhere even if they are only implicitly represented in the counseling process.

## ***Emotion***

Heesacher and Bradley (1997) acknowledged the primacy of emotion in counseling. More recent evidence has suggested that emotion has become somewhat of a *hot topic*, for example, the recognition of emotionally focused therapy as an empirically supported treatment, the extensive research of emotion in psychotherapy

(Greenberg and Pascual-Leone 2006), and the interest in emotion based on neuro-imaging studies (Barrett and Wager 2006). As we all know, human beings in their individual and joint processes, be it in every everyday lives or in counseling, are not simply functional and calculating problem solvers operating in relational and intentional complex systems while constructing their world and themselves. Human beings are, first and foremost, emotional creatures at their best and their worst. Thus, emotion represents processes that are an inherent part of every action, but which are characterized by specific psychological, behavioral, and physiological features. The role and function of emotions that are not extreme are particularly well recognized when these emotions are missing. For example, many clients complain that they do not feel anything the whole day and cannot make a decision or generate energy. In this case in counseling and psychotherapy, we experience that the whole action system of such a client collapses. This might lead to the premature conclusion that if emotions were reinstalled, the action systems would follow as if emotion and action were separate. Accordingly, a contemporary counseling approach must integrate the emotional processes in all part of its theorizing and practice.

## Action in Counseling Practice

In the next 18 chapters of this book, we have joined a number of other authors to make a strong case for the role of action in counseling. In Part I, each author addressed how action is reflected in one of the critical issues in the counseling field identified above. In Part II, we propose the contextual theory of action as applied to counseling and return specifically to the critical issues to demonstrate how they are included and addressed in contextual action theory. It is fair of you, the reader, to raise the honest and forthright concern at this juncture, we have provided the framework and addressed the big issues, but how does it actually work in counseling practice. The following eight chapters (Part III) address how action theory can be used in counseling with various populations or for different counseling issues. The authors of these chapters have had direct experience with contextual action theory as counselors and researchers. Each chapter reveals, in a different way, the utility of contextual action theory as either a framework to understand a problem or client and to suggest ways to intervene with clients based on this understanding. Finally, in Part IV, we distill a number of counseling processes and procedures based on contextual action theory.

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**Part I**  
**Action and Counseling Approaches**  
**and Issues**

## Chapter 2

# Designing Projects for Career Construction

Mark L. Savickas

Counseling has the goal of encouraging clients to take actions to improve their lives, and these actions occur both within the counseling session and outside it. The present book, unlike most books on counseling, highlights this action. The editors propose goal-directed action as an integrative conceptualization for counseling practice. They offer action theory as a comprehensive approach that may be used to integrate models of practice that concentrate on narratives, on relationships, or on emotions. The editors also highlight action theory as a general approach that applies to various life domains including career counseling, relationship counseling, crisis counseling, and so forth. In this book, they have organized colleagues and collaborators to discuss how they approach actions from a range of theoretical perspectives. The goal for the chapters is to systematically relate diverse counseling models to the contextual action theory approach.

The present chapter applies the action theory model to counseling for career construction (Savickas 2011). This chapter explains how practitioners view action while conducting career construction counseling. Thus, this chapter concentrates on a single life domain, namely, the theater of work. While action has always been an implicit part of the career construction model, its central role has been underdeveloped both conceptually and practically. So, I welcome the opportunity to closely study contextual action theory, relate it to career construction counseling, and then use it to further elaborate and improve career construction counseling theory. The chapter begins by describing seven perspectives shared by action theory and career construction counseling theory.

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## **Perspectives Shared by Action Theory and Career Construction Counseling**

Action theory (AT) and career construction counseling theory (CT) share in common several critical features. They both emphasize the flow from practice to theory rather than from theory to practice; the fidelity and fluidity of individuals; the epistemology of social constructionism; and the prominent role of identity and adaptability as meta-competencies.

### ***Practice and Theory***

AT and CT both begin with practice. Rather than developing a theory and then applying it to practice, AT and CT theorize practice. Counseling practice is always ahead of theory because practitioners must respond to the needs and goals that clients bring to consultation. These issues emerge from their current context, which itself develops faster than theory can account for it. Theory must, in a sense, catch up with the realities that clients bring to counseling. Accordingly, both AT and CT concentrate on the actions of individuals, the context in which the actions occur, and the meaning they give to their actions. Both AT and CT recognize that career development theorists have been preoccupied with confirming the veracity of their models of vocational behavior, without examining how their theories might be applied to assisting individuals in counseling. For many years professors and practitioners mistakenly took theories of career development to be theories of counseling, but they are not (Savickas 2012). Career development theories portray careers yet say little about how to intervene in fostering them. Practitioners need counseling theories that provide them with models for and methods of intervention. Also, models and methods of vocational guidance are just that, they are methods for guiding and advising not counseling. Taking models of vocational guidance to be career counseling models has led to many counselors and professors of counseling eschewing an interest in what has been called career counseling but usually performed as vocational guidance. Both AT and CT concentrate squarely on developing counseling models that theorize effective practices and integrate theories of career development and career counseling.

### ***Individuals as Fixed and Fluid***

Young et al. (2011, pp. 88–89) contrast theories that take essentialist and narrativist perspectives on human beings. Essentialists concentrate on the stability of enduring attributes of the self, including personality traits and vocational interests. Narrativists concentrate on the flexibility of the self as fluid through experiences and changing by narrating life-shaping stories. The premise of essentialism or

narrativism taken to its extreme generates difficult problems in conceptualizing counseling practice. AT and CT avoid either extreme in staking out a middle ground that avoids an either/or split position. AT recognizes the long-term persistence of an individual's identity while at the same time acknowledging an ongoing process that constructs and reconstructs identity (Young et al. 2011, p. 90). CT endorses both the fidelity and flexibility of individuals in viewing the steadfastness of self-as-actor in maintaining a persona and reputation and viewing the flexibility of self-as-author in responding to new contexts.

### ***Social Constructionist Epistemology***

Both AT and CT apply a social constructionist epistemology in asserting that people construct their own lives and careers through action. Both models attend to the social nature of construction by viewing it as “joint action” or “co-construction”. Actions that construct selves are viewed as performing narratives that are rife with intentionality, meaning-making, and mattering. Narrative is about who you are, action is about performing you on a social stage. Through action in the theater of work, an individual becomes the story that they constructed during career counseling.

### ***Meta-Competencies***

It appears that AT and CT agree that the actions which construct the self and the life are informed and shaped by two meta-competencies. The term meta-competence refers to the general ability to learn and apply more specific competencies or skills within a domain. Hall and Chandler (2004, p. 9) described two meta-competencies that foster navigating transitions, namely identity and adaptability. Relying on self-knowledge and knowing when and how to make career changes fosters the smoothness of transitions. For AT, the meta-competencies that direct action involve identity and goal-directed process (Young et al. 2011, p. 17). CT also highlights two meta-competencies in terms of the self-as-author's identity and the self-as-agent's adaptability. In career construction theory, identity involves an understanding of self in relation to social roles and environmental contexts while adaptability involves the readiness and resources needed to cope with developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas in these social roles and environmental contexts.

### ***Motivation***

Both AT and CT view humans as being in action. CT fully accepts George Kelly's (1955) premise that human beings are a form of motion. To be alive is to move; to



be human is to act. This premise means that neither CT nor AT need to focus on the issue of motivation as fueling or energizing behavior because people are always in movement. Instead of concentrating on motivation—or how to make people move—these two theories concentrate attention on individuals' direction and style of movement. CT sees the direction of movement as toward equilibrium with the environment. When a current adaptation or *punctuated equilibrium* is upset, individuals move to restore equilibrium or stasis, either at the previous level or at a higher level that is simultaneously more stable and flexible.

### ***Adaptation Projects***

Furthermore, CT agrees completely with AT that counseling is a goal-directed project. While the goals for AT pertain to most life domains and adjustment issues, the goals for CT deal with making a transition in a work role. Young et al. (2011) defined transitions as goal-directed actions that are most readily understood as a project. From this astute perspective, career counseling clients seek assistance in their projects of adapting to a work-role transition. The goal of CT is to assist clients in making transitions. Young et al. (2011) point out that counseling itself is also a project. For CT, the project of counseling is constructing the client's adaptation project and encouraging actions to complete a transition.

### ***Action/Project/Career or Actor/Agent/Author***

Both AT and CT view action as behavior infused with meaning. CT views action across a panorama of actor, agent, and author. Initially, it surveys the person engaging in the action, that is, the actor. The actor portrays some character in each action episode. This character may be viewed subjectively as a self-concept and objectively as a persona with a reputation. As children develop their characters they slowly become agents in their own lives. As agents they direct their action in striving for goals, which eventually become hierarchically arranged projects. As emerging adults, individuals begin to author a life story. This narrative identity conveys what is meaningful to them across projects. The binding power of narrative continuity and coherence transforms the sequence of projects into a consequential career. So the panorama of CT views action as involving the behavior of the actor, striving of the agent, and explanation of the author.

The CT language of actor, agent, and author relates directly to the AT language of action, project, and career. The actor is about goal-directed action in the short-term; the agent is about projects that link actions across a mid-term; and the author is about career and the long-term meanings of action projects. AT focuses attention squarely on agency and clients as agents in their own lives. CT views agency as "adaptability," one of the two meta-competencies for constructing a career. Because

AT shares more with CT's view of the agent than with its views of the actor or author, the remainder of this chapter will examine the relationships between AT's innovative conception of career counseling as a transition project and CT's conception of counseling to increase agency and adaptation.

This topic merits attention because, in sum, AT and CT both emphasize that practice precedes and informs theory, individuals are both steadfast and flexible, individuals co-construct their selves and identities using the cultural resources provided to them, the meta-competencies of identity and adaptability can play a prominent role in steering and informing goal-directed action to bridge transitions, human beings move so motivation is about steering behavior, and career counseling is a transitive project. The next section describes how AT can inform CT, in particular elaborating CT's views on career counseling as a project that seeks to increase clients' agency and adaptation as they transit from school-to-work, occupation-to-occupation, and job-to-job. This inquiry begins with examining how AT and CT, despite sharing many perspectives, rest on different premises about counseling as a project.

## Premises of Career Construction Counseling

AT and CT differ in how they conceptualize the transition project and how to approach it in counseling. Young et al. (2011) prefer to view transition projects as not predetermined. They recommend approaching transition projects as the client sees them and then jointly constructing the projects with the appropriate goal-directed action. While it is difficult to disagree with this view, CT prefers viewing transition projects through the lens of socially constructed expectations or developmental tasks. The tasks that compose the transition project, and conceptualized by the individual are in a broader sense predetermined by society's grand narrative of career. Young et al. (2011, p. 16) accurately see the developmentalist view of CT as proposing what is necessary for a successful transition. They prefer instead to look at what is actually happening in the actions of the transition and how a person conceptualizes and organizes these actions.

As an example of the difference in AT and CT premises, let us consider a case that involves a mother helping her daughter apply to college (Young et al. 2011, p. 14). Taking a psychosocial view, CT conceptualizes this action as implementing a choice, hopefully based on crystallized preferences and a specific decision. Young and colleagues prefer not to view this as a developmental task but rather focus on the intentions of the person involved. They encourage counselors to appreciate how the person involved views the action, that is, what they see the behaviors as being about. It seems that AT focuses on the current actions and the intentionality that informs it, while CT includes the antecedents and consequences that shape the present behavior. Of course, there is overlap, yet the differences lead CT to a different view of counseling as a project.

### ***Transition Tasks as Habitus***

Young et al. (2011) state that there may be substantial overlap in how a person conceptualizes actions and what is expected culturally and chronologically. Possibly, AT would accept the construct of *habitus* to explain the overlap. The French sociologist Bourdieu (1977) introduced the construct of *habitus* describing it as an internalization of social structures that inhabit the mind as acquired mental schemata and expectations. Developmental tasks seem to function as a *habitus* in supplying individuals with meanings they can use to interpret their transitions and careers. Developmental tasks represent an interpenetration of objective divisions of the social world and an individual's subjective vision of them, causing a correspondence and interplay between an individual's mental structures and a community's social structures (Guichard and Cassar 1998). They offer an account that people use to understand themselves and others. On the one hand, developmental tasks enable individuals to think about and take stock of their transitions and adaptation by using social schemata provided by society. On the other hand, developmental tasks enable other people including counselors to comprehend an individual's personal experience and private meaning by embedding it in and systematically organizing it according to a dominant social structure. In addition to providing a commonsense framework, developmental tasks synchronize individuals to their culture by telling them in advance how their transitions should proceed. Individuals enact their unique version of these transition scripts in a particular historical era, given location, and specific opportunity structure that discriminates by race, age, sex, religion, and class. As a social script for progressing through an orderly sequence of predictable tasks in a cycle of adaptation, developmental tasks give hope and security to many people. Nevertheless, there are other people whose experience does not fit the story. Instead of progressing in transit to new adaptation, some people encounter barriers that force them to regress, drift, flounder, stagnate, or stop.

### ***Adaptation Tasks***

The CT views the project of transition from the perspective of a pre-determined script of effective responses for making an adaptation. Simply stated, the outline of *adaptive actions* includes orientation, exploration, stabilization, maintenance, and disengagement. The script can be applied to the example of applying to a college. The CT examines the adaptive process beginning with the need to orient oneself to the project of attending college. It quickly moves to the exploration of potential colleges to attend based on self and circumstances. This exploration eventually leads to a commitment to a particular college or small group of colleges and the task of applying to them. Having secured a position at a college, the individual stabilizes that choice by enrolling in the college, then mastering its requirements and maintain progress through the curriculum, and eventually disengaging from that punctuated adaptation by graduating. However before graduation, the individual must initiate

a new project involving the school-to work-transition. Similarly to AT, CT would attend to how the individual views the task of college application, but would view the client's meaning-making and actions through a social lens of expectations about its place in a sequence of adaptation.

The counselor would use the adaptation script as a habitus to understand the individual's narrative about the college application and the transition project. This is where the counselor's expertise enters the picture. Counselors bring their own expert knowledge and professional skill to the collaboration. Counselors are experts in how to help individuals grow in self-knowledge and develop as a person during transitions. While clients know themselves and are experts on their own lives, counselors know about transitions. Together through co-construction of transitive narratives and joint action, client and counselor may approach the transition project by merging the client's knowledge of content with the counselor's knowledge of process. Of course, counselors realize that there are limits to client self-knowledge. CT acknowledges that some clients are strangers in their own lives; they may even use denial and keep secrets to hinder adaptation to a transition. To know their lives and learn how to make transitions is why many clients seek counseling.

Although AT and CT may approach the action project of transition using slightly different premises, they share the same fundamental counseling goal. Action is about moving toward goals. In the language of AT, the goal of counseling is to increase client agency or acting power by establishing goals and ways to achieve them (Young et al. 2011, p. 25). In the language of CT, the goals of career counseling are to increase client "adaptability, narratability, and activity" (Savickas et al. 2009, p. 245). Counselors use these superordinate goals to steer or guide what happens during counseling. But first, the counselor has to form a working alliance in which to establish these goals and have a client commit to engage in the processes that move toward these goals. According to AT, the counselor steers toward the goal of what is useful to the client, controls the session by identifying steps needed to reach goals, and regulates the session by responding to affect and meaning-making processes. CT has a highly developed structure for steering joint action, identifying steps in the counseling project, and regulating the session. The processes of steering, remaining on task, and regulating sessions have been explained thoroughly elsewhere (Savickas 2011). Less attention has been paid to inducting clients in career counseling by co-constructing what is to ensue as a project for joint action. Until now, CT has not fully elaborated how to induct clients into counseling at the beginning of a consultation. Taking AT's perspective, this induction may be viewed as project management.

## **Defining Counseling Goals and Designing the Transition Project**

AT characterizes counseling with three phases or functional steps (Young et al. 2011, p. 188). After establishing a working alliance, the first phase involves identifying pertinent ongoing projects and then orienting client to the goals and processes

of counseling through exploration of their presenting concerns. The second phase involves working on projects and monitoring client progress. The third and final phase involves reviewing changes that have been made and discussing how to stabilize these accomplishments. As noted earlier, CT has well-articulated procedures for what AT calls phases two and three. CT could advance by attending more thoroughly to what AT calls phase one, identifying projects. To do so in this chapter, I apply to CT the metaphor of *project management* from the business world. In industry and in CT, a project denotes a temporary endeavor with a clear beginning and end undertaken to meet unique goals and objectives (Nokes 2007). Project management begins with carefully planning and methodically organizing what will occur during counseling to achieve those specific goals. CT practitioners do this careful planning and methodical organizing by following a routine with eight elements to be described in turn: goals, projects, trajectory, context, emotions, readiness, resources, and audience.

### ***Working Alliance and Counseling Goals***

The initiation of the client–counselor relationship is, of course, a critical step because as counseling begins, so it goes. The counselor must consciously and conscientiously establish a working alliance. The two words of *working* and *alliance* are each important. Alliance means a relationship based on trust, empathy, and encouragement. Working means moving toward some goal or outcome. Without a clear vision of a joint goal, it is difficult to firmly establish a working alliance, much less take coordinated action that works. CT tries to make this clear to clients from its opening inquiry. After greeting a client, and maybe some small talk, the counselor asks a critical question.

Counselors begin the professional relationship by asking a client how counseling may be useful to her or him. This question about goals is asked in more than one way to ensure that the working alliance begins with a joint goal. A second way that counselors ask about clients' goals is to inquire what they would like to accomplish by the end of that session and by the end of counseling. In posing this question in two or more ways, counselors signal to clients that the ensuing interaction is a collaboration, one consisting of joint goal-directed actions that address the project under construction. The inquiry is intended to suggest to clients that they take the lead in doing the work on the project. This suggestion is important because a main predictor of successful counseling outcomes is that the client works harder than the counselor. If counselors do most of the work, as they sometimes do in performing vocational guidance and test interpretation, then their clients advance only minimally in constructing their projects.

Counselors listen closely to how a client describes a goal for counseling because that goal may already be implicitly achieved in the way she or he speaks about the goal. For many clients, what they seek from CT is already present in the shadows of their imagination. For example, I recently counseled with a 45-year-old female

social worker. She sought counseling just to learn about her herself. I told her that we could do that yet she would be better served by a more specific goal. In reply, she wanted to consider a job change because she wanted to be more of an advocate than a cog in the machine. Of course what developed through counseling was clarifying her story and gathering momentum to do just that. She was frustrated by how clients were treated by a bureaucratic system and wanted to sit outside the bureaucracy as an advocate for those who were ignored or mistreated by the system. Implicitly, she knew the transition that she wanted to pursue and her project for counseling. Counseling only helped her acknowledge what she already knew.

As a second example, consider the client who said “I want to find out why I get depressed when I enter the science building.” The answer is obvious to the reader; the client did not want to be in the science building. The implicit goal of counseling for the client was to find a way to stay out of the science building. However as Einstein was reported to once observe, the thinking that gets us into a problem is the not type of thinking that will get us out of the problem. In CT, counselors believe that the story that got this student into the science building will not allow him to stay out of the building. Depression is just a temporary way of avoiding the building. He needs a new story and that became the counseling project. Also reverberating in the shadows is a story of life outside the science building. According to Abraham Lincoln’s maxim, “A goal properly set is halfway achieved” (Ziglar 1997, p. 37). Thus, practitioners begin counseling by learning what a client wishes to accomplish through the consultation.

### ***Client’s Project***

As clients respond to this agenda setting inquiry, counselors listen for the project that clients will have to complete to reach their stated goals. CT counselors anticipate that the goal-directed project that most clients bring to counseling involves adapting to some change in circumstances or self. In working with high school and college students, the counselor typically listens for the *developmental task* that confronts the client in the form of a social expectations based on chronological age. Developmental tasks and customary transitions such as graduating from a training program, may be anticipated. Developmental tasks are usually viewed as positive changes or advances, despite the challenges involved. In comparison to students, employed adults seek counseling to cope with unexpected and unwanted changes such as the sudden loss of a job. Some clients seek career counseling because they need to cope with a work trauma such as an occupational injury that needs rehabilitation or harassment or bullying that need ending. Whether perceived as positive or negative, the changes prompted by tasks, transitions, and traumas may acutely disorient individuals from their accustomed view of the work and their place in it and thereby produce confusion and conflict. Occasionally, adults seek career counseling with a project prompted by yearning for a personal transformation in the form of a new challenge or change of scenery. The CT uses the generic term *adaptation*

*project* to refer to the group of tasks, transitions, traumas, and transformations. In short, after first understanding clients' goals for counseling then practitioners identify the type of project to be undertaken, whether it is coping with a developmental task, occupational change, work trauma, or personal transformation.

### *Adaptation Cycle*

Adaptation projects have been characterized with predictable trajectories called a transition cycle (Nicholson 1990), learning cycle (Hall), and adaptation mini-cycle (Savickas 2005). Nicholson (1990) proposed a transition cycle as a framework for analyzing work-role changes. A transition cycle begins with preparation to enter a new work role. During the period called encounter, the individual enters the role and tries to make sense of it. This sense-making and socialization leads to a period of adjustment during which the individual embeds self in the organizational culture and role. During a long stabilization period, the individual concentrates on performing the role and maintaining coworker relationships. Sooner or later, whether induced by the organization or the individual, preparation for a new role begins. This almost inevitable new preparation occurs because 70% of jobs started by workers in their 30s end in 5 or less years. One in four workers has been with their current employer for less than a year (Mullins 2009).

Hall (2002) has explained that because of the dejobbing occasioned by the digital revolution, work environments now longer can be characterized with Super's (1952) description of a single life-long career cycle with a series of stages. The traditional "career" has been replaced with a sequence of shorter learning cycles. Each career learning cycle has periods of exploration, trial, establishment, and mastery. Eventually, the individual will need to begin a new learning cycle starting with exploration because the current position has been reshaped by n technology, the economy, or personal factors.

The CT also proposes that career adaptation as a project follows a predictable cycle of activities each named for their principal function: orientation, exploration, stabilization, management, and disengagement. The sequence portrays the adaptation min-cycle, with each period calling for a different type of goal-directed actions. After becoming oriented toward and familiar with the adaptive demand, individuals may explore its requirements, risks, and rewards as they search for social opportunities and consider possible selves. Ideally, exploration progresses from broad to narrow to advanced. Broad exploration finds information that allows crystallization of tentative preferences. Narrow exploration gathers relevant information for making a decision from among the preferred alternatives. Eventually, implementation of that decision by trying on the choice in the form of an apprenticeship or job allows advanced exploration of person-position fit. After a period of trial or trials, individuals stabilize in a position by making a commitment projected forward for a certain period of time. As they perform the position requirements, they consolidate their new equilibrium and maybe refine it. This may or may not be followed

by a prolonged period of stasis during which they manage the role and preserve a self-concept. At some point, they envision on the horizon changing positions and new challenges. With growing disorientation and disequilibrium, they begin the process of disengagement from the current role and transit into what comes next. For example, an unemployed worker is oriented toward the need to find a new job, so he/she explores opportunities. He/she crystallizes preferences, then specifies a choice, and eventually tries on a new position in which he/she stabilizes. Having established himself/herself in the role, he/she manages the position for a long period before he/she begins to disengage as he/she needs or chooses to change jobs or even switch occupational fields. As he/she moves through a series of projects—each with their cycle of adaptation—he/she constructs his/her career. For CT, career is actually the narrative that a person tells that links the sequence of their work projects from school to retirement.

In CT counseling, the practitioner determines where a client is in the adaptation project to identify the adaptive demands that the client is facing or will soon face. Career counseling differs for individuals in different phases of the adaptation cycle. Individuals in the orientation phase must become familiar with new challenge and ways to negotiate them. Individuals in the exploration phase benefit from exploration-in-breadth to crystallize a group of vocational preferences, then in exploration-in-depth to specify an occupational choice from among the preferences, and eventually advanced exploration by trying on a position in the chosen occupation. During the period of stabilization, the new employee may need assistance in fitting into the organization culture, learning the job duties, interacting with co-workers, and eventually consolidating a position in the organization. Having established self, the worker then enjoys a long period of managing the role by preserving self-concept, maintaining what they have achieved, and keeping up with new developments. In career counseling, issues of concern during the period of management often include handling conflict with supervisors or coworkers, harassment, bullying, boredom, failure, and plateauing. Eventually either by choice or circumstance, the worker slowly decelerates and disengages from the position and orients to the need to enter a new one. Hopefully, disengagement from a current position overlaps with orientation for a new adaptation.

### ***Contextualizing the Project***

In addition to assessing client progress along the trajectory of adaptation, practitioners seek to understand how the adaptation project relates to other life roles. The CT counseling concentrates on the work role, yet is sensitive to the fact that clients engage in multiple roles and manage several identities in manifold contexts. During the last week, I worked with the following three clients. One client wanted to return to a job he left 2 years ago. That job was in a different part of the country. He liked his current job yet yearned to return to the church and community that he had left behind. He wanted to change jobs to restore what he had lost by his last job



transition. The second client had just received a divorce settlement that included 2 years of college tuition. She did not want to seek employment yet needed to work at a job in which she could support herself. The third client had been offered an attractive position in another state yet was conflicted because he did not want to leave his family-of-origin. Of course sometimes career counseling is just about the job yet in many instance such as those just mentioned other life roles shape the project undertaken and the choices to be made.

## *Emotions*

In forming a working alliance and contextualizing a client's adaptation project, counselors must listen not just for the motion of the project but the emotion of the adaptation. Kidd (1998) pointed out that emotion is usually missing in career theories because they emphasize rational problem solving. The CT counselor must recognize feelings and then provide emotional validation and support to the individual as well as begin to manage negative emotions. Therefore, CT practitioners usually encourage clients to elaborate their statement of a career project in feeling terms. Then CT practitioners follow the emotions. It is those feelings that had signaled to the client that something requires their attention and moved them to seek counseling. These same feelings direct CT practitioners attention to a client's growing edge and what to do next. Raising awareness of these feelings clarifies the problems that clients envision as they engage adaptation projects.

Before projects can be organized and action engaged, feelings must change. The most frequent emotion encountered in designing adaptation projects is anxiety. In beginning counseling, practitioners attend to anxiety to reduce the disquiet that accompanies the need to adapt. Anxiety often arises because individuals fear the changes in self required by the adaptation. Anxiety is about the vague future. They must move ahead yet they do not know how things will turn out, thus they feel anxious. In the old equilibrium, they could anticipate what was going to occur each day. In the process of leaving one role and moving to another, the anticipations do not hold. They are unsure about what to expect. This ambiguity prompts feelings of anxiety that may stall movement to the new adaptation.

While anxiety is the most common feeling, it is not the only emotion that counselors should look for because adaptation projects typically excite other feelings as well. In fact, Kelly (1955) advised counselors that feelings may be considered constructs of transition because emotions express the experience of moving from an old adaptation to a new adaptation. The person experiences a world in flux. If clients have trouble letting go of an old role, then they may feel sadness, grief, or depression over their loss. Other clients may feel frustrated or angry because they cannot control elements of the transition. These emotions are stronger if the client has little experience in making role changes. Feelings also will be more intense if a core role must change.

If practitioners want to clarify a client's feelings about the career problem, poetry provides a way to talk about feelings that quickly goes to the heart of the matter. For some clients, it may be useful to have them write a simple poem to increase self-awareness and voice their feelings. Mazza (2003, p. 39) designed a practical writing exercise in which clients complete sentence stems. The practitioner chooses the first word, say "indecision" or "barriers," and then has the client complete the sentences. Consider the following example from one client who initially found it difficult to attach feeling to his presenting problem of indecision.

Indecision is the color (*plaid*)  
It sounds like (*a strong wind blowing through trees*)  
It feels like (*trembling*)  
It tastes like (*molasses*)  
It smells like (*smoke*)  
It makes me feel like (*sleeping*)

In response to clients' emotional responses, CT counselors offer comfort. Comforting is a form of social support that provides emotional relief. Comforting means encouraging the client, normalizing the problem, and reformulating a metaphor (Miceli et al. 2009). Practitioners offer comfort by expressing confidence in clients' coping potential and reassurance about their ability to resolve the problem. Usually, practitioners help clients view the adaptation project as a normal life experience and one that is transitory. This must be done in a way that does not minimize the problem yet does communicate that the client can manage it. If the client seems overwhelmed by the problem, then the counselor offers comfort by reformulating it with a less dramatic or intense metaphor that reduces the magnitude of the problem. Emotions must be validated and managed to prepare clients for engaging and managing their projects.

## ***Readiness***

As part of exploring client emotions, counselors try to discern a client's readiness to begin an adaptation project. The CT denotes the readiness to engage in these projects as adaptivity (Savickas and Porfeli 2010). The Minnesota theory of work adjustment (Dawis and Lofquist 1984) refers to this readiness as celerity or speed of response to change. The initial recognition of a need to adapt feels troubling because individuals cannot readily assimilate the dissonant disequilibrium with their customary experience and anticipations. Nevertheless, at first individuals try repeatedly to assimilate the disorienting dislocation into their existing actions and identity. At some point, the need to adapt to the transition raises to a critical threshold at which time the individual realizes they need to accommodate the change (Brandtstädter 2009).

Because individuals differ in their readiness to cope with transitions, counselors listen to hear why clients came to counseling now. Counselors want to hear whether the client is forward thinking and planning how to deal with an impending project

which they anticipate, or the client has been pushed by a parent or teacher who wants the client to get assistance in coping with a life change, or the client has avoided the project until it has now become a crisis that requires immediate action. Take the example of college students. Some students seek counseling during their first semester because they wish to be planful and conscientious in how they use the college experience. Other students come because the college mandates that they declare a major in their second semester of the sophomore year and they seek help in meeting this normative mandate. Still other students seek career counseling during the month before graduation. They have procrastinated and avoided thinking about transitioning into employment. The goal-directed actions of the counseling project typically differ with clients who take a proactive, normative, or avoidant approach in dealing with transitions (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000). Proactive clients are quick studies, normative clients seem too dependent on the counselor, and avoidant clients miss appointments. Client readiness to engage the project and their style of adapting shape how they deal with the process and tasks of counseling—as does their resources.

### *Adaptability Resources*

As they initiate counseling, CT practitioners are keen to learn what resources clients bring to the project. In *listening to* clients describe what they wish to accomplish through counseling, practitioners *listen for* the client's career adaptability, that is, the deficits and resources that clients bring to the project. Career adaptability denotes an individual's psychosocial resources for coping with current and anticipated vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas that, to some degree large or small, alter their social integration (Savickas 1997). These attitudes and competencies function as self-regulation strategies to shape adapting actions.

The CT offers a model of adaptability that provides a framework with which counselors may listen for as clients initially describe their goals for counseling. At the highest and most abstract level consider four dimensions of career adaptability, each named according to its function and principal activities: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. These four dimensions represent general adaptation resources and strategies that individuals use to negotiate critical elements of an adaptation project and stabilize new adaptations. Each dimension includes a homogeneous set of attitudes, beliefs, and competencies—the ABCs of career construction—that combine to shape dispositional response tendencies relative to the adaptive challenges. These feelings and states of mind shape the use of the cognitive competencies, which include comprehension and problem-solving abilities. The cognitive competencies, in turn, inform goal-directed action aimed at constructing career projects. In short, the adaptive individual is conceptualized as (a) becoming *concerned* about adapting to a new work role, (b) increasing personal *control* over making the adaptation by being conscientious, (c) showing *curiosity* by exploring options and possibilities along with personal preferences, and (d) gaining the *confidence* needed to engage

in goal-directed action. The four *adaptabilities* of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence will each be discussed in turn.

*Career Concern* Concern essentially means a sense that it is important to plan and prepare for tomorrow. Concern about adapting to an impending change is the pivotal dimension of career adaptability. It directs attention to the future and increases awareness of imminent and intermediate challenges and choices. In addition to this future perspective, concern prompts a sense of continuity that connects past experiences, present circumstances, and future anticipations. Attitudes favoring preparedness and belief in continuity dispose individuals to develop competence in planning, which includes skill at sequencing one's activities along a time line that spans from the present situation to a desired future. This means actions that make them aware of what is required, relate themselves to what they must do, and become involved in preparing for the change. This orienting behavior will help them to meet the challenges with growing interest and confidence. It also reduces anxiety by giving language and structure to the initial ambiguity and disorder.

A lack of career concern is called career *indifference*, and it reflects planlessness and pessimism about the future. Without concern for the future, individuals often feel demoralized about their careers and occupations. They do not usually seek counseling on their own; rather a family member or faculty refers them. Their sense of hope has to be ignited. Their apathy can be addressed by career interventions that induce a future orientation, foster optimism, make the future feel real, reinforce positive attitudes toward planning, link present activities to future outcomes, practice planning skills, and heighten career awareness. These coping attitudes, beliefs, and competencies strengthen career concern, and prompt consideration about exerting control over one's career projects.

*Career Control* Career control is an aspect of intrapersonal processes that foster self-regulation, not interpersonal processes that impact self-regulation (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2010). Control involves self-discipline and being conscientious, deliberate, organized, and decisive in negotiating adaptive demands. Its opposite is confusion, not dependence. A sense of control disposes individuals to proactivity rather than denial and avoidance of adaptation tasks. Conscientious attitudes and belief in personal responsibility incline individuals to intentionally direct and steer their actions through competence in decision making.

A lack of career control is often called career *indecision* and enacted as confusion, procrastination, or impulsivity. The inability to choose can be addressed by career interventions designed to foster decisive attitudes and decisional competencies. Career indecision is addressed by interventions that enhance the ability to decide by clarifying choices and what is at stake. Specific techniques include assertiveness training, decisional training, self-management strategies, and attribution retraining that attributes success to effort rather than luck or other people. These coping attitudes, beliefs, and competencies strengthen career control, and prompt curiosity about possible selves.

*Career Curiosity* With a sense of effortful control comes the initiative for learning about the adaptation being faced and the range of opportunities and barriers that

it presents. This initiative leads to inquisitiveness about both self and the context, which should lead to exploration and information seeking about self, situations, and the fit between the two. The resulting fund of knowledge helps clarify choices to be made and what is at stake. A broad fund of knowledge about self and possible opportunities brings with it an increase in realism and objectivity, important factors in making wise choices.

A lack of career curiosity can be accompanied by a detachment that maintains inaccurate images of self and naïve visions of potential opportunities. This *unrealism* can be addressed by career interventions designed to provide information. Self-knowledge can be increased by test interpretations about abilities, interests, and values. Occupational information about work requirements, routines, and rewards can be obtained from computer websites such as the O\*NET (<http://www.onetonline.org>). However, unrealism may not be easily addressed by these cognitive interventions. Thus, counselors may turn to interventions such as clarifying values and discussing extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards. Even more powerful are interventions that engage the client in apprenticeships, job simulations, shadowing workers, part-time jobs, and volunteer opportunities. Because ambiguity creates a possibility for novelty and new experiences, practitioners may use counseling to help clients explore new ways of experiencing themselves in the world. Once individuals collect a fund of information and form tentative preferences for moving ahead in the transition, they usually wonder if they can realize their aspirations.

*Career Confidence* The fourth and final dimension of career adaptability is confidence. Self-confidence denotes the anticipation of success in encountering challenges and overcoming obstacles (Rosenberg 1989). It takes confidence to initiate goal-directed action. People must believe that they can successfully execute the actions needed to complete the adaptation project. Self-esteem usually brings with an increased competence in solving problems, especially important in dealing with the often complex and ill-defined predicaments encountered during adaptation projects.

A lack of career confidence can result in career doubt and *inhibition* that thwarts actualizing roles and achieving goals. Career counseling interventions, in general, build self-confidence through the relationship dimension of counseling. A working alliance with a counselor enhances the client's self-acceptance and self-regard. Career inhibition is addressed, in particular, by interventions designed to increase feelings of confidence through role modeling, success acknowledgment, encouragement, and problem-solving training. It is also addressed by systematically deconstructing mistaken beliefs about social roles, gender, and race that inhibit action.

### ***Profiles of Career Adaptability***

In theory, individuals should approach adaptation projects with a sense of concern that leads to awareness of what needs to be done, a sense of control over the change that brings conscientious and effortful involvement, the curiosity to explore social

opportunities and experiment with possible selves that fit together realistically, and the confidence to engage in goal-directed action aimed at constructing an adaptation. In reality, individuals vary in how they approach transitions, and this variation can be conceptualized along these four dimensions of adaptability. Individual variation in readiness, resources, and responses leads to different rates of progress, with possible fixations and regressions. Delays within or disequilibrium among the four developmental lines produce problems in adapting because of demoralization rather than concern, denial rather than control, detachment rather than curiosity, and doubt rather than confidence. Accordingly, comparing development among the four dimensions is a useful way to assess career adaptability resources and deficits. In career counseling for choices, CT counselors diagnose these problems as indifference (demoralization), indecision (denial), unrealism (detachment), and inhibition (doubt). More importantly, the assessment of adaptability resources provides a counseling plan with specific goals and associated strategies. For example, if a client shows indifference and lacks career concern, she or he may benefit from interventions that prompt anxiety about the future and then address this anxiety by exercises and interactions that foster planful attitudes, planning competencies, and preparatory behaviors. In contrast, if a client has a strong sense of concern and control yet seems unrealistic or unknowledgeable, she or he may benefit more from interventions that foster career curiosity in the form of inquisitive attitudes, exploration competencies, and information-seeking behaviors. In addition to internal resources for adaptability, clients bring with them potential external sources of support.

### ***Audience***

Finally, in initiating the working alliance counselors listen to clients' goals and projects to hear about the audience for this work. In addition to internal adaptability resources, many clients have external resources such as social support to help them negotiate their projects. However, some clients have an audience that tries to shape the project, and in some cases even impede or prevent the project from succeeding. Counselors need to learn who is on the client's side and who is not as they collaborate with clients in designing the project to construct and adaptation.

### **Project Design**

The chapter has enumerated a list of eight elements to which counselors attend in appraising a client's description of how counseling may be useful to them: goals, projects, trajectory, context, emotions, readiness, resources, and audience. It actually takes longer to read this chapter than to work with a client in appraising the elements enumerated. The CT counselors perform this *project appraisal* rather

quickly, often almost intuitively. I use the term project appraisal to distinguish it from the more traditional *person appraisal* (Crites 1981) that uses ability tests, personality inventories, and interest surveys to draw a psychological picture of the client. In comparison, project appraisal attends to identifying the client's adaptation projects and counseling goals.

When performed systematically, project appraisal follows a routine in analyzing and understanding the client's reasons for seeking counseling and goals for the consultation. First, counselors listen closely to how a client describes their goals for counseling because that goal may already be implicitly achieved in the way she or he speaks about the goal. Second, counselors identify the type of adaptation project that clients have undertaken: coping with a developmental task, occupational change, work trauma, or personal transformation. Third, counselors determine how far a client has progressed in the adaptation cycle to identify the adaptive demands that the client is facing or will soon face. Fourth, counselors contextualize the adaptation project by considering the other life roles and responsibilities that engage the client. Fifth, all along counselors recognize and respond to the feelings evoked by the adaptation project. Sixth, counselors try to discern a client's readiness to engage the next steps in the adaptation project and the process of counseling. And finally, counselors explore clients' adaptability resources and their audience for the project.

After formulating this project appraisal, CT practitioners complete the induction into counseling by proposing a goal-directed project on which client and counselor may agree. Counselors also explain the process and tasks that they will use to collaboratively pursue the project goals. This statement of the adaptation project and counseling as project management may be negotiated and revised until the client agrees to pursue it and feels comfortable working with the counselor on it. Then counseling proper begins as client and counselor co-construct the project and monitor progress toward goal achievement.

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# Chapter 3

## Career Counseling: Joint Contributions of Contextual Action Theory and the Systems Theory Framework

Wendy Patton

It is clear that the developing worldview of contextualism, and the development of constructivism in cognitive psychology, have been important influences in changes in career theorizing and career practice. In their view to the “future of career,” Collin and Young (2000) emphasized the importance of two crucial issues—the construction of individual identity and the need to understand the individual in his or her context, spatial and temporal. Collin and Young were calling for theories of career that would provide a new framework for a postindustrial world and relate to the epistemological root metaphor of contextualism (Collin 1997; Collin and Young 1986; Lyddon 1989).

Both contextual action theory and systems theory are derived from the root metaphor of contextualism, which has been proffered as a worldview to assist scientists and practitioners in organizing day to day experiential data. *Contextualism* has been an influence in a number of fields in the social sciences, for example, Collin and Young (1986), Young and Valach (2004), and Vondracek et al. (1986) in career psychology, and Steenbarger (1991) in counseling psychology. A contextual worldview emphasizes that how events are viewed is linked to the perspective of each individual. Furthermore, it conceives development as an ongoing process of interaction between the person and the environment. Within this process, random or chance events contribute to an open-ended unpredictable state of being. An outcome of these elements of the contextualist worldview is the active nature of the individual as a self-building and self-renewing “self-organizing system” (Ford 1987), as opposed to a passive organism at the whim of maturational and developmental stages and/or environmental forces. Career work within the contextualist worldview focuses on individuals actively interacting with and within their social and environmental contexts. Career development is not viewed as an intraindividual developmental process. In describing their contextual action theory of career, Young and Valach (2004) emphasized that “our approach is grounded on cultural/contextual rather than developmental psychology ... the contextual action theory

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explicates social perspectives that have the effect of moving it beyond traditional career approaches and linking it directly to constructionism” (p. 501). Young and Collin (2004) discussed the notion of constructivisms, highlighting the connection between constructivism and social constructionism.

Constructivism is directly derived from the contextualist worldview in that the “reality” of world events is seen as constructed from the inside out by the individual (that is, through the individual’s own thinking and processing). These constructions are based on individual cognitions in relation with perspectives formed from person–environment interactions. “They are both individual and interactional, creating order for the person and guiding interactions with the environment” (Steenbarger 1991, p. 291). Constructivism, therefore, views the person as an open system, constantly interacting with the environment, seeking stability through ongoing change. The emphasis is on the process, not on an outcome; there is no completion of a stage and arrival at the next stage as in stage-based views of human development.

The influence of constructivism and the ongoing drive for convergence, both of career theories and between theory and practice, have been key drivers in this literature for two decades. Indeed Guichard and Lenz (2005) identified three main characteristics evident in the international career theory literature: “(a) emphasis on contexts and cultural diversities, (b) self-construction or development emphasis, and (c) a constructivist perspective” (p. 17). A full discussion on the development of career theories, and the philosophical underpinnings of career theory are beyond the scope of this chapter and have been discussed elsewhere (Patton 2008; Patton and McMahon 2006a). This chapter identifies the theoretical contributions of the STF (Patton and McMahon) and Contextual Action Theory (Young and Valach 2000, 2004; Young et al. 1996, 2002), each of which has advanced thinking in theory integration and in the integration between theory and practice. Young et al. (2007) noted the connections between the Patton and McMahon systems theory approach and the contextual action theory approach and these will be highlighted in terms of the application of these theoretical developments to practice in career counseling, with a particular focus on the commonalities between the two approaches and what counselors can learn from each of them. In particular, this chapter will discuss common conceptual understandings and practice dimensions.

## Contextual Action Theory

Young et al. (1996) proposed a framework for understanding key aspects of many contextual approaches to career, emphasizing the applicability of contextual action theory as a means of integrating aspects of contextualism. These authors defined the basis of contextualism as “the recognition of a complex whole constituted of many interrelated and interwoven parts, which may be largely submerged in the everyday understanding of events and phenomena” (p. 479). Context consists of multiple complex connections and interrelationships, the significance of which is interpreted according to an individual’s perspective. Young et al. identified several

aspects of the contextualist metaphor crucial to their contextual explanation of career, including the goal-directed and context-embedded nature of acts. Change is integral within this perspective, and “because events take shape as people engage in practical action with a particular purpose, analysis and interpretation are always practical” (p. 480). Young and Valach (2000, 2004) emphasized that the contextual action theory of career serves as an integrative approach to career theory in that it not only integrates social–contextual and psychological perspectives, but also “explicitates social perspectives that have the effect of moving (the theory) beyond traditional career approaches and linking it directly to constructionism” (2004, p. 501).

Young and Valach (2008) described the differences between action, project, and career, where action is the intentional goal-directed behavior of persons, and project refers to actions with common goals occurring over a period of time. When projects merge together over a long period of time and assume a significant place in an individual’s life they are referred to as career. They assert that as the Contextual Action Theory framework “posits interrelated systems, process and levels for our understanding of career, it allows a more detailed response to what comprises the life-enhancing career” (p. 647). In further explaining the approach, Valach and Young (2004) emphasize the relational underpinning of contextual action theory, “an important feature of action is its contextual character. That is, the action processes, the methods, and the constructs are related to each other. It is only in relation to each other that they make sense...” (p. 72). Valach and Young (2004) identified six aspects of contextualism relevant in the Contextual Action Theory of career. These include the focus on goals of actions rather than their causes; acknowledgement that actions are embedded in context and the subsequent implications for the client–counselor relationship; the prominence of change in career; recognition that “goal, end, and purpose define the practicality of action and our understanding of it” (p. 73); acknowledgement that contextualism works from the present which is, therefore, the beginning place for counselor’s work with clients; and “Finally, ... adhering to a contextual stance is a specific way of looking at human processes and not just physically distinguishing between a person and context” (p. 73).

## The Systems Theory Framework

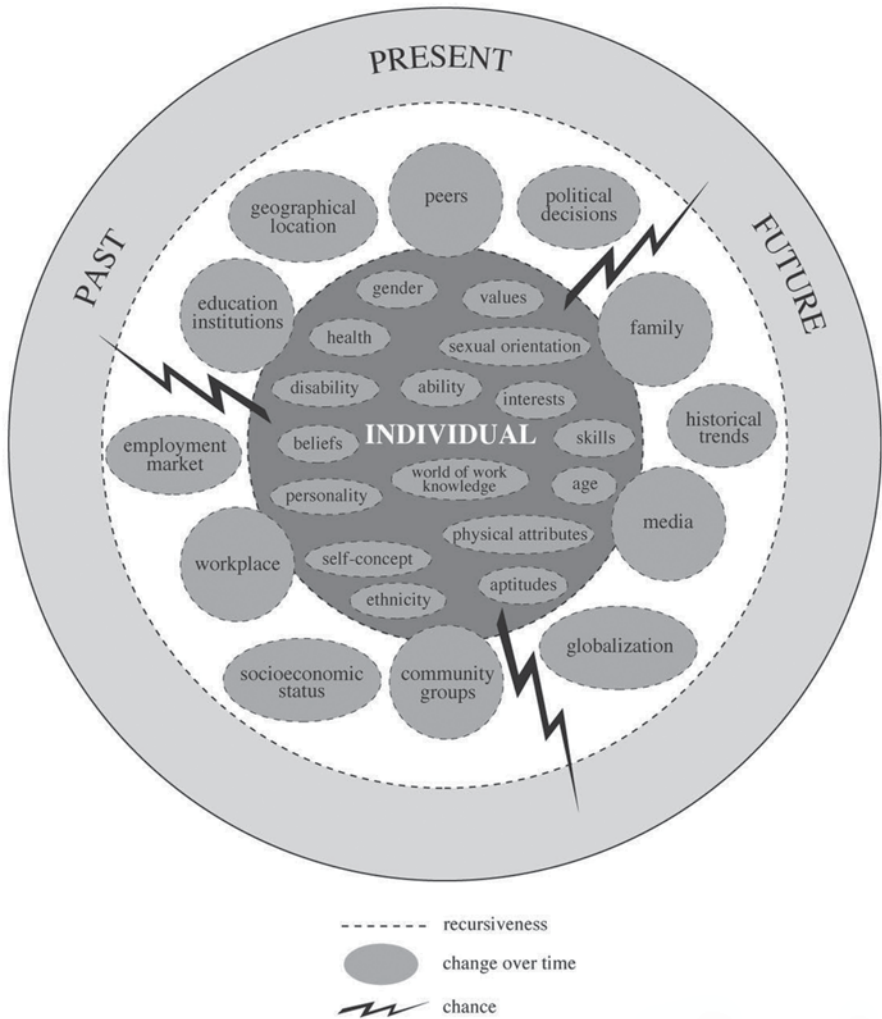
The emergence of systems theory has essentially been a reaction to the traditional classical, analytic, or positivist worldview and a reflection of the growing status of the contextual worldview (Patton and McMahon 2006a). The systems worldview values the whole, where a system is viewed as more than the sum of individual parts. Patterns of interrelationship between parts are more relevant in understanding behavior than cause and effect between parts. Progression within these patterns is not always linear; the complexity of a system is far too great. In contrast with stage-based theories of behavior, systems theory emphasizes that not all change is incremental: enduring change may also be sudden. Systems theory reflects the complexity of human behavior and simple definitions are difficult to construct (see Patton

and McMahon 2006a for further discussion). However, a number of elements and principles of systems theory can be proffered. The individual is conceived both as a whole and as a sum of component parts. The human system is viewed as purposive, ever-changing, and evolving toward equilibrium; change in the individual occurs to maintain stability. An individual's behavior is conceptualized as "a product of a dynamic and holistic psychological system in which person and context interact in complex and reciprocal ways" (Chartrand et al. 1995, p. 46). Human behavior is a function of the interaction of the person and context: the human system, itself a complexity of interrelated subsystems, interacts with other systems and subsystems, living and nonliving. Systems can be open and closed—with human systems being open—"An open system can be understood only in relation to its necessary and actual environments. Trying to understand people's functioning separate from their context would be the same as treating them as closed systems" (Ford 1987, p. 50). Human life consists of ongoing recursive processes involving disorganization, adaptation, and reorganization.

Systems theory is the core underpinning of the STF (Patton and McMahon 1999, 2006a), first presented in 1995 (McMahon and Patton 1995) and largely formulated by 1997 (Patton and McMahon 1997). The STF is presented as a metatheory of career (see Fig. 3.1). It is constructivist in nature because of its emphasis upon the individual. It presents as social constructionist because of its location of the individual within myriad social and contextual influences. Its focus on process influences, in particular *recursiveness*, and the role of *story*, emphasize the centrality of the individual actively construing the meaning of his or her life within multiple content and process influences.

As a metatheoretical framework, the STF is applicable to theory analysis at a macro-level and a micro-level. For example, theoretical accounts of influences such as personality and family are variously explained in the extant literature. Patton and McMahon emphasize that the application of the STF in integrating theory and practice is located within the crucible of the individual. Through individual analysis at this micro-level, the meaning of such influences is elaborated by the individual. Essentially, the STF provides an opportunity for individuals to construct their personal theories of career development through the narration of their career stories and the elaboration of meaning in career counseling. Thus, in terms of career practice, systems theory lends itself to a theoretical and practical consistency.

Space limitation allows only a brief description of the STF here. Readers are referred to Patton and McMahon (2006a). The STF represents the complex interplay of influences through which individuals construct their careers. The term influence was deliberately chosen as it does not assume positive or negative connotations but rather affords individuals the opportunity to ascribe their own meaning to each influence. The STF places emphasis on both content and process influences. In addition, it takes into account the unpredictability of career development through the inclusion of chance. As systems perspectives conceive of person and environment as entities that dynamically interact, the STF is reflective of the constructivist worldview with its emphasis on holism, personal meaning, subjectivity, and recursiveness between influences.



**Fig. 3.1** The systems theory framework of career development. (Patton and McMahon 1999)

The content and process influences are represented in the STF as many complex and interconnected systems within and between which career development occurs. Content influences include intrapersonal variables such as personality and age, and contextual variables which comprise social influences namely family and peers, and environmental–societal influences such as geographic location or socioeconomic status. The intrapersonal influences such as gender, interests, age, abilities, personality, and sexual orientation are depicted at the heart of the STF as part of the individual system. In terms of systems theory, the individual is a system in its own right, with the intrapersonal influences representing its subsystems.

However, individuals do not live in isolation, but rather live as part of a much larger contextual system of relationships. Thus, in the STF the individual is both a complex system in its own right and a subsystem of layers of a broader contextual system represented by the social system and the environmental–societal system. The social system refers to the other people systems with which the individual interacts, for example, family, educational institutions, the workplace, and peers. While each of these is a system in its own right that interacts with the individual system, it is also a subsystem of the broader social system.

The individual and the social system occur within the broader system of society or the environment, the environmental–societal system. Although the subsystems of the environmental–societal system may seem less directly related to the individual, the influence of elements such as geographic location, globalization, or socioeconomic circumstances may be profound.

A feature of the STF is its capacity to represent the dynamic nature of career development within and between systems through its inclusion of the process influences of recursiveness, change over time, and chance. Recursiveness describes the recurring interaction within and between systems. Recursiveness does not imply reciprocal interaction; rather the nature of the influence and the degree of influence change over time. For example, while family as a relational context is an influence on individuals throughout life, the nature of its influence is likely to differ during adolescence and during adulthood. Time is represented in the STF as a circular depiction that emphasizes the nonlinear nature of an individual's career development and the integral role of past, present, and future influences.

In its relatively brief history, the STF has been applied to a range of cultural groups and settings (see Patton and McMahon 1997), qualitative career assessment (McMahon et al. 2004, 2005a, 2005b; McMahon et al. 2005a; McIlveen et al. 2003; McIlveen et al. 2005), career counseling (McMahon 2005; McMahon and Patton 2006b; Patton and McMahon 2006b), and multicultural career counseling (Arthur and McMahon 2005). In addition, its application across cultures has been documented (Patton et al. 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2002).

At a practical level, the STF provides a map to guide career counselors as they encourage clients to relate the details and reality of their own maps through the telling of their career stories (McMahon and Patton 2003; McMahon et al. 2004). Together, counselor and client gain insight into the interconnectedness of systemic influences on the client's situation. The STF has been conceptualized to serve as a map of the possible elements of clients' career stories as well as a map of the counseling relationship (McMahon and Patton 2006b). Career counselors also exist within their own system of influences, and career counseling, therefore, constitutes the connection of two systems of influence, those of the client and of the counselor, and consequently the formation of a new dynamic system, the therapeutic system (see Fig. 3.2; Patton and McMahon 1999, 2006a).

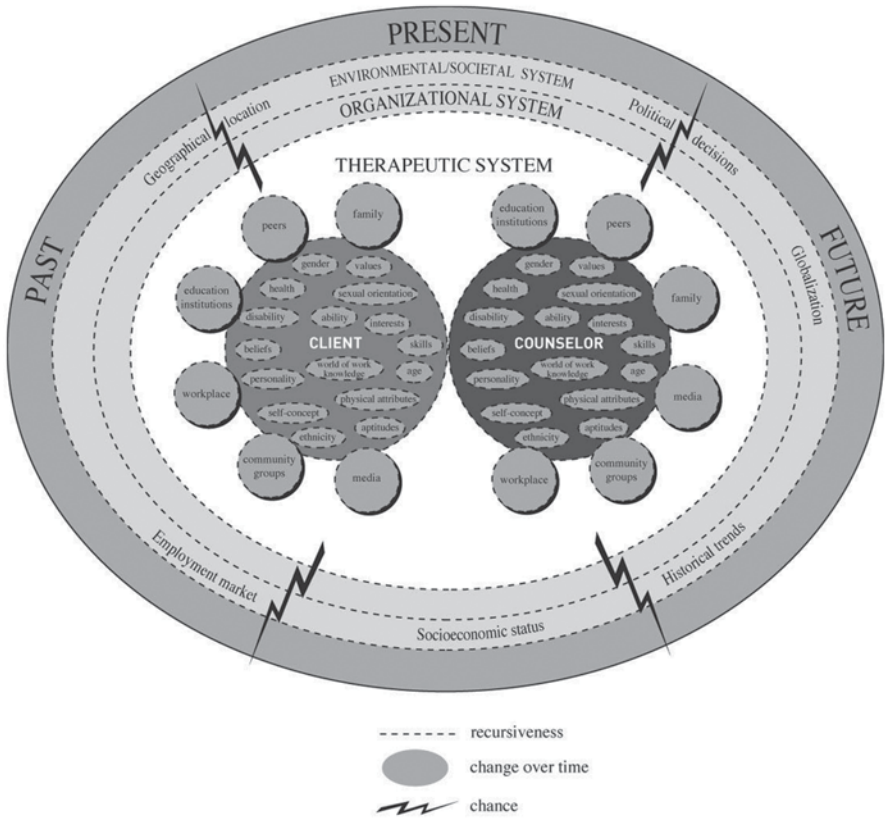


Fig. 3.2 The therapeutic system. (Patton and McMahon 1999)

### STF and Contextual Action Theory Approaches: Conceptual Understandings

Both contextual action theory and the STF have strong connections with the contextualist root metaphor. Each has emphasized particular aspects of this metaphor in their theoretical descriptions and in their operationalization of theory into practice. This section of the chapter identifies these aspects as understood within the STF and career counseling literature, and connects with similarities in understandings within the Contextual Action Theory approach. This section of the chapter will be framed around *conceptual understandings and practice dimensions*; similarities and differences between the STF and Contextual Action Theory approaches will be examined.

In applying the STF to career counseling, a number of conceptual understandings and practice dimensions that may guide the work of career counselors have

been identified (McMahon 2005; McMahon and Patton 2006b; Patton and McMahon 2006b). *Conceptual understandings*, which are interrelated, relate to the individual, systemic thinking, the notion of story, and recursiveness. A number of theoretical developments have enhanced our understanding of *the individual*—to being an active agent in his/her own construction of reality through subjective and intersubjective meanings (Collin and Young 1986, p. 842), and decision making (Bandura 1977, 1986); and to being interconnected in a unique manner with all layers of context (Vondracek et al. 1986). Following the work of Ford (1987), Leong (1996) asserts that “each individual is in and of him or herself a complex adaptive system” (p. 341). It is in this context that the individual is viewed in the STF.

Valach and Young (2009) extend this concept of the individual as a multifaceted system and emphasize that action theory views “all goal-directed processes as joint processes, thus clearly marking a position that distinguishes contextual theory from theories that identify agency and actions with individualism (p. 94). In conceptually connecting action, project and career in action theory, “we have already moved beyond the idea of the individual—whether considered from the perspective of personality traits or individual decisional processes—to ideas of joint action and the embedding of actions in socially constructed projects and careers” (Young and Valach (2008, p. 646). Young and Valach affirm that “joint action captures intentionality that is not fully accounted for by the individual intentions of the participants” (p. 646). Valach and Young distinguish this concept in Contextual Action Theory from other suggestions of shared goals and group action “because the most popular application of this thinking often considers the group as an acting unit or the family as a system—the concept of joint goal-directed actions, projects and careers, based on joint goals, is a paradigm that is different from the individualistic approach” (p. 94). In considering parents and adolescents engaging in career discussions about adolescents’ futures, Young et al. (2007) note that this is an example of a joint action, not that of an individual—“A particular contribution of action theory is its emphasis on the social. Thus, the unit of analysis in the work ... is not the individual, but the joint action of parent and adolescent” (p. 278). Valach and Young (2009) further extended this understanding of the individual in context and draw on relational ontology and the work of Slife (2004) who commented that “each thing including each person is first and always a nexus of relations” (p. 159). This notion emphasizes that it is the relationship between elements of a system which is the focus of inquiry. Consequently, action or goal-directed behavior can only be interpreted and understood when viewed within context, and contextual or environmental issues are only salient when viewed within the framework of individual volition (Valach 1990).

The complexity of *systemic thinking* is best described by Ford and Ford (1987) in their description of the Living Systems Framework. These authors emphasize that all aspects of the person interconnect in “goal directed activity” (p. 1). These “experiences “add up” to produce a unique, self-constructed history and personality” (p. 1). Change, which occurs variously, serves to assist in maintaining both stability and flexibility. “Thus the LSF cannot be easily characterized in terms of traditional theoretical categories. Rather, it is a way of trying to understand persons in all their



complexly organized humanness.” (p. 2). This definition reflects the holistic emphasis of systems theory, where all aspects of the person are seen as integrated into a whole. It also is suggestive of the fluidity of the individual system, and the notion that both flexibility and stability are incorporated within change. Contextual action theory also emphasizes systemic underpinnings, where action is seen as organized in a system of interrelated levels, with the meaning or goal of an action the highest level (Young et al. 2007).

At a broader level, career counseling takes place within the environmental–societal system and represents a recursive interaction between the counselor and a range of systems (see Patton and McMahon 2006a for a more extended discussion). Systems theory encourages interventions at all levels of the system other than that of the individual, and raises the potential for career counselors to be more proactive at this broader systems level. For example, career counselors may work with a family or an organization in the belief that interventions anywhere in the system will interact with other elements of the system to bring about change. This notion embodies the systems theory construct of feedback loops. A systems theory perspective may also assist clients to construct new meanings of their circumstances. For example, it may be helpful for individuals to view their employment circumstances in the context of changes in the social and economic climate of the nation (Patton and McMahon 2006a).

*Stories or narratives*, the third conceptual understanding, are key to constructivist counseling approaches (McMahon and Patton 2006a). The concept of story in systems theory was originally derived from Bateson (1979) who defined it as the individual’s explanation of the relevance of a particular sequence of connectedness in his or her life. Through stories, individuals make meaning of their lives—individuals are experts in their own lives who seek to make sense of them through the telling of stories. Indeed, their lives are multistoried. Through story, the patterns and themes of an individual’s life can be uncovered, and interconnections forged between previously unconnected events. On the surface, stories may appear discrete and unrelated; however, systemic thinking encourages counselors and clients to take a holistic view by locating the individual within the context of their whole system of influences. In so doing, the recursiveness and connection between the influences of the system may be examined, and patterns and themes in and between stories may be uncovered.

Contextual Action Theory emphasizes the notion of project, a construct which could be understood as similar to story. The project here refers to the process of the client (or clients) and the counselor working together over a period of time (Valach and Young 2004)—“when groups of actions occur across time and have a common goal” (Young et al. 2007, p. 279). One of the outcomes of this project is the joint construction of the client’s narrative (Young and Valach 2008, p. 654). Valach and Young (2004) emphasize that that these narratives are linked to the notion of interpretation, whereby people make sense of their lives through events, actions and contexts (p. 64). The narrative notion is very similar to the systems understanding of story embedded in the STF practice approach (McMahon and Patton 2006a).

A range of qualitative or narrative assessment processes have been developed to encourage individuals to create their narratives (Young and Valach 2008) or career stories (McMahon et al. 2004, 2005a) and both Contextual Action Theory and the STF have each developed processes. The four most popular methods of assessment are autobiographies, early recollections, structured interviews, and card sorts. While these methods are not new to counselors, many of them are new to career counselors.

The work of Young and his colleagues (Young et al. 1997) offers insights into interviews and conversations between adolescents and their peers and parents and the role of these relationships in action projects around career. Young et al. (2007) identify these conversations as action and use the project method to describe them. Valach and Young (2009) describe the subsequent self-confrontation interview in which the participants are shown the video recording and asked about their thoughts, feelings, and other aspects of the conversation. They also describe the importance of naive observation, and the focus in this method on asking members of certain communication communities to systematically describe behaviors of interest in video recordings. More importantly, Valach and Young assert that a third procedure is necessary that “Neither naive observation nor the self-confrontation interview provides enough information for a comprehensive analysis of the target processes. Thus, systematic observation complements these methods” (p. 92). Within this process actions, viewed as being based on “socially shared everyday thinking” (p. 92) are used as the unit of analysis. While this description is relevant to the action research method, it is also applicable to understanding Contextual Action Theory’s understandings in relation to the counseling process. In addition to the monitoring of projects as they occur in counseling sessions, Contextual Action Theory informed counseling includes the monitoring of target projects over time that contributes to their clarification, strengthening, and success.

The My System of Career Influences (MSCI) (McMahon et al. 2005b, 2005c) is an application of the STF which provides clients with the opportunity to meaningfully create their own career stories through reflection. It is a written process which facilitates the client’s drawing their own constellation of influences via a step-by-step approach of visually representing aspects of their career stories. In this way, the uniqueness and wholeness of clients’ career narratives or stories is emphasized and career counselors may gain insight into the interconnectedness of systemic influences in each individual client’s career story. It is a standardized reflection process that is presented as a 12-page booklet which invites people to consider their life roles, employment options, and previous career decisions, thereby formulating life themes or narratives for their life and career. Individuals are guided through a process in which they identify various factors influencing their life and then represent them in a system of influences diagram. The approach demonstrates a sequential building of the system of influences on one’s career.

The Career Systems Interview (CSI) (McIlveen et al. 2003) is another example of a narrative career assessment directly derived from the content and process influences of the STF (Patton and McMahon 1999, 2006a). The CSI encourages clients to view their career from the position of different influences as identified

through the STF, through the process of a free-flowing semi-structured interview. To increase a focus on particular influences, the client is encouraged to speak about similarities or contradictions within aspects of the career story. A key outcome of the CSI is the individual exploring previously unexpressed or undeveloped stories.

The fourth conceptual understanding, *recursiveness*, or the interaction between elements of the system, necessarily means that the system is dynamic. The dynamic process of recursiveness depicted in the STF illustrates the interconnectedness within and between the systems of influence. Themes and patterns in individuals' life stories are also illustrative of the process of interconnectedness. Young et al. (2007) note that recursiveness is a broad notion, incorporating feedback and feedforward processes, and that it extends "the bidirectional model as joint actions and joint projects raise the possibility of a joint intentionality, a new third thing that is not encompassed by the bidirectional approach" (p. 278).

## **STF and Contextual Action Theory Approaches: Practice Dimensions**

The STF not only provides a map to guide career counselors in terms of the possible content of client stories, it also provides a lens through which to view the *practice dimensions* of the career counseling process. These interrelated dimensions include connectedness, meaning-making, the nature of learning, agency, and the nature of the counseling relationship. This section will explore these dimensions and understandings brought to them by both the STF and Contextual Action Theory approaches.

*Connectedness* is a multileveled concept illustrated through the STF as essential for effective career counseling. As discussed, individuals do not exist in isolation and they and their careers are constructed in social and cultural contexts. Individuals connect with career counselors in a recursive system described by the STF as the therapeutic system (Patton and McMahon 2006a; McMahon and Patton 2006b).

Connectedness is intricate and multidimensional. Career counselors need to embrace their own "connectedness work", that is they need to connect with their own career stories in order to understand their own history, values, biases, beliefs and prejudices, and the sociopolitical system in which they live and work. In addition, career counselors connect with a body of theoretical knowledge and practical skills that inform their work.

Career counselors also connect with their clients, the relationship dimension of career counseling. Savickas (1993) suggested that supportive relationships help people to articulate their experience, interpret their needs, and shape their lives out of a range of possibilities. Essentially career counselors enter the lifespaces of another individual for the purpose of career counseling. Connecting with clients is a recursive process through which the counseling relationship deepens and strengthens over time. It is a relationship where clients are viewed as experts in their lives,

and where the career counselor encourages them to interpret and create their stories (Savickas 1993).

Connecting clients with their own system of influences is critical to the career counseling process within the STF approach. It is through this process that stories are remembered and told, and it is through the telling of stories that connectedness between the systemic influences is recognized. In terms of connecting with client stories, it is important that career counselors “start where the client is”. With the STF as a map that may guide the possible content of career counseling, clients may be encouraged to tell stories from their past, from their leisure activities, or from their community service. It is not uncommon for clients to compartmentalize their lives and not recognize permeating themes and patterns.

In summary, the task in career counseling within the STF is not so much to understand the parts of the system in detail, but rather to co-construct story and meaning around the system as a whole through elaboration of the recursiveness between the elements of the system of influence. At a fundamental level, connectedness is desirable between counselors and their own systems of influence clients and counselors in the counseling relationship, and clients and their own systems of influence. The narration of career stories fosters connectedness between individuals and the elements in their systems of influence as well as connectedness between elements of the systems.

Contextual Action Theory emphasizes that action projects are joint projects, also demonstrating a connectedness between counselors and clients. Contextual Action Theory agrees with the notion that the counselor’s role in counseling is “more reflective of joining in, listening to people, working with the client’s goals, and not imposing on their clients a particular view of the world ... counselors informed by contextual action theory join their clients in their ongoing actions and projects” (Valach and Young 2009, p. 87). Similarly, “the action theory explanation of career must also be understood as relational, a concept explicated extensively in contextualist approaches” (Valach and Young 2004, p. 72). It is only in relation to each other that the action processes, the methods, and the constructs make sense. Connectedness as notion is embedded in the joint nature of the project—the identifying of contextual elements in all aspects of the participants in the projects, and the recognition that the project is a joint construct in process and outcome. Action is not an individualistic construct which can be separated from relational and contextual notions.

In order that the telling of stories and the development of projects may be facilitated, the significance of *the counseling relationship* is acknowledged by both the action and STF approaches. It is important for career counselors to facilitate counseling relationships where a mattering climate is created (Schlossberg et al. 1989), a climate where clients feel valued, cared about, and appreciated, that they matter.

Within the STF approach, career counseling constitutes the meeting of two separate systems and the formation of a new system, the therapeutic system (Patton and McMahon 2006a). Following the systems theory notion of open systems, the boundaries of each system must be permeable enough to allow a relationship to develop and dialogue and resulting meaning to occur, yet impermeable enough for both parties to maintain their individuality. Thus, the boundary between the coun-

selor system and the client system needs to be maintained. As previously discussed, the career counselor needs a clear understanding of his or her own story formed through interaction with his or her own system of influences, past, present, and future before they can facilitate exploration of the client's life narratives including the meaning of career and work in their lives.

Young and Valach (2008) concur with the general perspectives of the nature of the counseling relationship discussed in previous paragraphs. Similar to the STF approach, Contextual Action Theory acknowledges that when the counselor and client work together they create a dyad—"a third thing that is neither individual action nor an external event" (Valach and Young 2004, p. 66). As such there is a greater emphasis on the joint nature of the counseling process than that espoused under the STF approach, it is the action of the dyad that is the focus rather than the interaction between client and counselor. Valach and Young (2009) further emphasize that the individual is less important and that the counselor–client interaction is a joint goal-directed process in which through a relational process their social reality is jointly constructed. They emphasize that relational epistemology underpins the counseling process, and that "it is not the copy of the objects "in there" which qualifies the epistemological process but the relationship constructed in the process of gaining knowledge" (p. 89). Within this perspective, however, they note that counselors must adopt and apply relational ethics in their work with the projects of clients.

*Learning* is a practice dimension recognized as important by both the action and STF approaches. It is the process whereby individuals construct and transform experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions (Holmes 2002). Learning through the counseling process is facilitated through connectedness, reflection and meaning-making. Within systems theory thinking, career counseling is viewed as a process of learning where stories are co-constructed between counselor and client to facilitate transition "toward more preferred futures" (Peavy 1998, p. 30). Contextual Action Theory emphasizes that career futures, and indeed all outcomes of counseling, are constructed through past and present actions and projects. Recognition and action toward the possible is embedded in joint actions of the counseling process.

The application of systems theory to learning changes our traditional view. The concept of knowledge acquisition, that is we add to our existing body of knowledge with new knowledge, is inappropriate. Rather than assume a quantitative view knowledge, that is we know more, it is viewed in a qualitative way. Within this perspective, new knowledge is incorporated into existing frameworks in a relational and associative way. Within the Contextual Action Theory perspective, this relational epistemology is also embedded in the discussion about learning and knowledge. It is not the object which is the starting point of inquiry; it is the relationship between elements which is constructed in the process of gaining knowledge that is ontologically meaningful (Valach and Young 2009, p. 89).

The process of *meaning-making* is key to the constructivist approach to counseling, and central within both the STF and action theory approaches. Valach and Young (2004) emphasize the connection between the construction and understanding of actions and retrospective and prospective meaning-making. The STF

counseling approach has drawn heavily from Peavy (2000) who emphasizes joint meaning-making—“both speaker and listener to enter an open communication interchange. What comes to be understood (shared meaning) is the result of negotiation. The two interpreters arrive at a fusion of understanding that takes the form of an agreement, understanding or shared knowledge” (Peavy 2000, p. 8). Thus, career counselors facilitate a process where stories are elaborated, new meaning is invited or constructed, and possibilities for the future elicited.

The shift from positivism to constructivism has also created the notion of individuals as *agentic* and self-actualizing. Within the counseling process this requires that the counselors acknowledge that the individual is able to speak for themselves, that they are the expert in their own lives. The counselor’s role is to support the individual’s agency, assist in their construction of their own knowledge, and affirm their work to construct their preferred career futures. As discussed previously, this position is relevant to both the Contextual Action Theory and STF approaches to career counseling. The Contextual Action Theory approach however extends the notion of agency in affirming the notion of intentionality and in focusing on the joint intentionality of the actions and processes which comprise the counseling project.

## Conclusion

Both the STF approach and the Contextual Action Theory approach are derived from the contextualist root metaphor. It is clear that they are closely related in *conceptual understandings* although there are distinctive differences and these are not just in language. The STF focuses on interrelated levels of systems, Contextual Action Theory focuses on “joint actions and processes”. The STF focuses on the therapeutic system and emphasizes the connectedness and separateness of the counselor and counselee systems; Contextual Action Theory emphasizes the joint action of the dyad as crucial in the process, emphasizing the dyad a little more in its conceptualization of the relationship. Indeed Contextual Action Theory explains this approach with detailed discussion of the relational approach as providing the basis of conceptualizing the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of career counseling practice (Valach and Young 2004, 2009). Conversely, the STF approach has developed only surface connections to date with relational approaches, with a focus on the application of the relational paradigm to practice (see Patton 2007).

The approaches also share *practice dimensions*. A number of measures and activities have been developed to guide the practitioner in translating the STF into practice (McMahon and Patton 2006b; McMahon et al. 2005b; McMahon et al. 2005a; McIlveen et al. 2003). Contextual Action Theory has similarly developed detailed descriptions of counseling approaches and research approaches to demonstrate its application (see Valach and Young 2004, 2009; Young et al. 2007 for examples).

The STF is an overarching framework focusing on all the parts as well as the whole, providing a metatheoretical framework for integrating existing theories, and theory and practice. It offers a framework for the blending of what different dis-

ciplines can bring to career theory, and a congruence between theory and practice applicable to all individuals. With the individual as the central focus, constructing his or her own meaning of career, constructs of existing theories are relevant as they apply to each individual. The STF encourages pluralism as each individual's career is the prime concern. "The contextual action theory framework for career is itself not prescriptive ... Rather it is a conceptual framework that allows for understanding the constituent parts of career. The critical feature is that, because this paradigm posits interrelated systems, processes and levels for our understanding of career, it allows a more detailed response to what comprises the life-enhancing career" (Young and Valach 2008, p. 647).

The STF and Contextual Action Theory approaches have more that is common than different. In developing a closer knowledge and understanding of each of them, and their shared understandings and practices, we can develop a new informed connectedness in our theorizing and in our practice.

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## Chapter 4

# Agentic Action in Context

Mary Sue Richardson

The notion that engaging in action is a central experience in human life and in contemporary counseling theory and practice is indebted to the work of Richard Young and his colleagues (Young et al. 2007; Young and Valach 2004). In this chapter, I elaborate on this notion to propose that agentic action is the basic process through which people co-construct lives of meaning. The main task of counselors from this perspective is to facilitate the emergence of agentic action in people's lives. The understanding of agentic action to be elaborated in this chapter is informed by the counseling for work and relationship perspective that posits that there are four major contexts through which most people co-construct lives; that is, market work, unpaid care work, personal relationships, and market work relationships (Richardson 2012a, 2012b). In other words, these are the major social contexts for agentic action directed toward the co-construction of lives. This more holistic emphasis on helping people co-construct lives, not just careers, is an important characteristic of contemporary vocational psychology (Fouad 2007; McMahon and Patton 2006; Richardson 2002, 2012a, 2012b; Savickas 2009; Savickas et al. 2009; Young and Valach 2004). The designation of the four major social contexts through which people co-construct their lives is a more radical reshaping of the work of vocational counselors, especially in specifying two separate contexts of work (Richardson and Schaeffer 2013a, 2013b).

Action itself is behavior that is suffused with subjectivity, with subjectivity referring to the dense texture of conscious and unconscious intentional states that frame action (Brandtstädter and Lerner 1999; Bruner 1990; Kitayama and Uchida 2005; Searle 1983). Intentional states include beliefs, attitudes, hopes, fears, and desires. It is from some compilation of this set of intentional states that actions emerge. The notion of action encompasses behaviors that “may be reflexive, automatic, voluntary, social, communicative, or reflect that hidden resource called ‘will power’” (Morsella 2009). Baumeister et al. (2009) suggest that there are two different styles

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of action that are central, those having to do with autonomic processes and those processes that are more conscious and controlled. I situate agentic action in this second category. Agentic action is action that has a particular quality (Cochran and Laub 1994). It is action characterized by some level of conscious purpose by which people pursue their aims in response to the circumstances of their lives (Richardson 2012a, 2012b). Agentic action is action directed toward some level of personal or collective goal. Thus, agentic actions are relevant across individualistic and collective cultures (Kitayama and Uchida 2005; Markus and Kitayama 2004).

A basic premise of this position about the centrality of agentic action is that the pursuit of personally desired ends or aims is the basis for a life of meaning (Martin and Sugarman 1999). Whereas all actions are suffused with subjective meanings, agentic actions have a particular kind of meaning in which they comprise actions that people want to take. In relation to the project of co-constructing a life, agentic action is about taking action in pursuit of a life that you want to live.

Clearly, agentic actions pertain to all aspects of living from actions related to everyday social practices to actions that are fraught with potential impact on how a life might evolve. For example, the process of making dinner, a commonplace social practice, is replete with agentic actions. A person first has to think about what he or she might want to cook and eat, as well as what kind of food is affordable. A plan then has to be made to buy the necessary ingredients in the time available. This set of agentic actions, put into play by an upcoming meal time, may then have to be modified or changed if something comes up of more pressing importance that requires attention. In this case, a new set of agentic actions takes precedence. Agentic actions that are relevant to the process of co-constructing a life may encompass, for example, registering on an internet dating site, deciding to invite some new friends over for dinner, inquiring about a continuing education course at your local college, and asking your boss for a raise. From this perspective, the task of the counselor who wants to help people co-construct their lives is to help them engage agentially in the major social contexts in which they are participating or wish to participate in with special attention to those agentic actions that have to do with what is happening in peoples' lives regarding their work and relationship contexts and pathways.

A critical aspect of agentic action is the reflexive processing of experience (Martin and Sugarman 1999; Rosenberg 1988). What this means is that as people take agentic actions, they experience the results of their actions, and, on the basis of this experience, they may reconsider or redirect what they do next. A teacher who tries out a series of different approaches in a struggle to engage a class of students exemplifies this process. The significance of reflexivity is heightened in situations characterized by frequent and/or radical change in which the feedback from experience may be constantly shifting.

In this chapter I first situate the significance and meaning of agentic action in relation to contemporary social conditions and the theoretical perspectives of contextualism and narrative theory. Following is a discussion of the possibilities for agentic action in relation to issues of power. Finally, I offer some reflections on the relationship between agentic action and identity in a world in flux.

## Contemporary Social Conditions

Most would agree that the stability of the social world within which people construct lives has radically altered in recent decades (Adam et al. 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991). Although this is, perhaps, most evident in what I refer to as the world of market work, that is, the work that people do for pay (Collin and Young 2000; DeBell 2006; Fouad 2007; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Moen and Roehling 2005; Storey 2000; Wharton 2006), radical change is evident across personal and familial domains as well. With respect to market work, the most significant change has been the erosion of the contract between employer and employee that traded hard work and loyalty for job security. In contrast to the stable set of occupational alternatives from which people could make choices in the twentieth century (Savickas 2000), we now have a changing constellation of employment opportunities that are continually revised due to technological advances, pressures of globalization, shifting markets, and corporate practices. Within these changing constellations, employment stability can no longer be taken for granted. While the occupational structure has always undergone change, the nature of change in the contemporary world of market work has increased exponentially.

Further compounding the loss of long-term employment stability is the erosion of what is referred to in the United States as the loss of middle-class jobs. In the United States the job structure is increasingly bifurcated with increases in high level jobs and low level jobs and decreases in the kinds of jobs that have traditionally been filled by those who do not have high level or specialized education and training (Judt 2010; Peck 2011; Reich 2007). The contemporary job market is also reeling from the impact of the loss not only of stable jobs, but of full-time jobs as well (Savickas 2011). A number of social theorists have described a second bifurcation of the job market with full-time positions, on the one hand, and what is referred to as contingent employment, that is, part-time, contract, and project-based work, on the other hand (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Wharton 2006). Taken together, these changes lead many to experience overt or covert feelings of insecurity regarding how they are going to support themselves. In relation to Blustein's (2006) taxonomy of needs that are addressed by work, it is the basic need for survival and some measure of economic power that is most directly challenged by these changes. Moreover, these changes have occurred as economies across the world have shifted to an adult working model in which all adults, who are able, are expected to engage in market work for most of their adult lives (Duncan et al. 2004; Lewis 2001, 2002).

Similar radical changes are occurring in personal and familial domains (Gonzalez-Lopez 2002; Marks 2006; Taylor 2011). For example, marriage itself appears to be becoming a privilege of the more affluent, increasing numbers of children are being born to single mothers, and more adults than ever before are living by themselves as well as living in intergenerational households. The designation of a new stage of life, at least in the Western world, of emerging adulthood in which the central task is to achieve a sense of being an adult, suggests that the social world is becoming more difficult to negotiate (Arnett 2000). Although those who

describe the phenomenon of emerging adulthood emphasize the opportunities associated with an extended period of exploration, the flip side of this picture may well be difficulties in constructing viable and stable life structures. An extended period of exploration may be necessary because it is difficult to find viable market work pathways in an ever-changing economy and enduring relationships in the midst of economic insecurity. Such exploration is possible when supported by some level of affluence. Emerging adulthood is not found among the less fortunate who, in the absence of economic buffers, get locked into low-level and dead-end jobs and early or single parenting at young ages.

In response to an uncertain social world in flux, scholars describe an increasing individualization of the life course (Giddens 1991; Lewis 2002). That is, rather than a set of normative scripts that help to guide how a life is to be co-constructed, individuals have to figure it out for themselves from the increasing options that are available. It is in this context that the significance and meaning of agentic action as the central process in co-constructing lives can be elaborated.

The significance and meaning of agentic action can, perhaps, best be clarified by contrasting it with the more traditional notion of decision making that has been considered the central process in vocational psychology, a field that has specialized in helping people make decisions about the kind of market work they want to do and with facilitating their career development (Phillips 2011; Phillips and Jome 2005). Making decisions about what work or career to pursue makes sense in a world in which there is some kind of stable set of alternatives to choose from. As has been noted, this stable set of alternatives no longer exists. The notion of agentic action enables us to recast this process of making decisions about the kind of work to do to a process of finding some directionality in market work contexts, a process of engaging in the agentic actions that will eventually comprise the market work pathways of a life.

The notion of agentic action helps to shift the emphasis from “what suits me”, a question that reflects the prevailing matching paradigm that has dominated the field (Phillips 2011), to “what do I want to do now” or “what can I do in this situation given the possibilities”. Rather than making decisions or choices about the kind of market work to do with an underlying rationale that there is a best fit to be found, this process, driven by agentic action, is about taking next steps. In addition to the work of Young and Valach (2004), other contemporary vocational theorists also emphasize the importance of taking action in the face of uncertainty (Gelatt 1989; McIlveen 2009; Mitchell et al. 1999; Pryor and Bright 2003; Weick 1996). Agentic action is also the underlying process that describes how people take steps toward the unpaid care work they will do at different stages in their life and the relationships in which they will participate.

Although choice can also be used to describe agentic action, choice in the context of agentic action is simply that a person could have done otherwise in a given situation (Hays 1994). It is not about a choice from a stable set of alternatives. Agentic action takes place in the shifting sands of possibilities and constraints in a world in flux. It is about finding a direction and then modifying that direction as needed. Agentic action implies a continued and lifelong dialogue with the social world in which multiple feedback loops enable a reflexive conversation between persons and the conditions they encounter in their social worlds. It is here that the

reflexivity of agentic action is most important. These feedback loops having to do with the reflexive processing of experience make possible a constant correction or redirection of emerging and evolving life pathways. The co-construction of lives conceived in this way is the mirror image of the reflexive project of the self described by Giddens (1991) in relation to conditions of late modernity.

An awareness of the life-long demands placed on people to engage in the process of charting and recharting their lives in the absence of normative scripts makes the issue of helping people co-construct their lives relevant to all counselors across a range of different kinds of counseling practices. Whatever else they may be dealing with in counseling, concerns about finding directions across life contexts will be germane to increasing numbers of people across the life span. From this perspective, helping people take agentic action in their major life contexts is a task relevant to all counselors, not just those who specialize in vocational counseling.

## The Contextualist Perspective

The understanding of agentic action elaborated in this chapter is situated in a contextualist perspective regarding the nature of change, a perspective that is radically different from the organismic models that underlie much of the developmental theory with which we are most familiar (Lerner 2006; Lewis 1997; Pepper 1942). Rather than postulating some kind of underlying and unfolding developmental process, contextualism posits that change is a function of the interactions, and transactions between persons and their social contexts. The change that results from these interactions and transactions can evolve in any direction, depending upon the nature of the interactions and transactions. Most critical for our understanding of agentic action is that contextualism decenters the individual as the primary locus of change. Agentic action can go only so far. What is critical are the interactions and transactions between persons and the agentic actions with which they engage their social contexts. In this sense, it is not appropriate to speak of people constructing lives. People can only co-construct lives in concert with their social contexts. What I want to do may not be possible or feasible in the social contexts in which I find myself. For example, a gay man in the United States may want the long-term stability of being married to his partner, but this might not be possible given the political and legal climate of the state in which he lives. In this sense, contextualism mitigates the power of agentic action and places it more fully within social constructionism, an issue I will return to following a discussion of the narrative understanding of action.

## The Narrative Understanding of Action

Narrative theory provides a way to understand the emergence of actions in lives. A basic tenet of narrative theory is that narrative is the primary means by which people organize the experience of their lives (Bruner 1990; McAdams 1993;

Polkinghorne 1988; Sarbin 1986). Without narratives to help to structure our experience, we would be overwhelmed with sensory data. It is through narrative that we explain ourselves to ourselves and to others. It is through the recounting of the stories of what has happened in our lives that we develop a sense of self and identity. In fact, according to Bruner, our selves are our stories. According to Polkinghorne, the more complete the story that is told, the more integrated the self will be.

What is especially interesting about narrative is the way that it ties us to culture. The impetus to tell a story about what has happened arises when something out of the ordinary has happened and a person needs to explain it to herself or himself and to others. In trying to make sense of an experience that is out of the ordinary, a person makes use of the story lines of the culture or cultures in which he or she lives, adapting these story lines to individual circumstances. However, the meanings ascribed to an experience are essentially provided by the culture or cultures in which he or she lives (Bruner 1990).

Although there is a tendency to think about narrative as having to do with the past or with experience that has already happened, the essence of narrative theory, at least according to Ricouer (1980), is not about the past but about lives lived in time. Narrative theory posits that time is the central dimension of human experience. People live in the present, saturated by past experience, as this past experience is encapsulated in their narrative, and informed by a future that unfolds by way of emerging actions. According to Ricouer, there is a deep narrative process that knits together both past and future in the present. In this deep and synergistic narrative process, the story lines of the future emerge and are a function of the co-construction and reconstruction of the narratives of the past in the present. Similarly, the emergence of the story lines of the future may well precipitate a reconstruction of narratives of the past. We can think of the emergence of actions as the emergence of the story lines of the future. Agentic actions are the story lines of the future most likely to lead to the co-construction of meaningful lives. However, a story line is only that, just a story line. Any story line may evolve into goals, projects, and an identifiable life pathway, transmute into a different story line, or disappear depending upon the interactions and transactions that occur in the social contexts in which a person participates.

What is especially helpful about narrative theory as a way to understand the emergence of action and agentic action is that it makes the issue of time central to counseling theory. People are always living in and moving through time. The task of the counselor in helping people co-construct their lives is essentially about helping people co-construct their lives moving forward through the facilitation of agentic action, while, at the same time, attending to the need to co-construct and reconstruct narratives about the past. It is about helping people engage with their futures and their pasts, as these dimensions of time exist in the present.

It may be useful to compare this narrative understanding of the emergence of agentic action to the action theory that informs the work of Young and colleagues (Young et al. 2007; Young and Valach 2004). Their contextual action theory provides a framework for examining the translation of agentic actions into the goals and projects through which people construct lives and especially about the ways that people engage in joint actions and joint projects in constructing lives. The

theoretical perspective of narrative theory emphasizes the initial emergence of actions as part and parcel of an ongoing narrative process that brings together the construction and reconstruction of stories about past experience and the emergence of the story lines of the future in the present. This narrative process in turn constitutes the co-construction of selves and identities that provide a sense of continuity over time, a sense that may be particularly critical in a world in flux. While narrative theory and contextual action theory differ in some ways, both are rooted in contextualism and both consider the social meanings of action.

## **Agentic Action and Power**

The social constructionist perspective that informs this chapter posits that experience is the product of the interaction of persons and their social contexts (Gergen 1991, 1999, 2009; Gergen and Davis 1985; Rorty 1999). In other words, what we experience, our inner subjectivity, does not flow from the inside out, as most of us are wont to think, but, rather, it is a product of our interactions and transactions with the social worlds we inhabit. The same thing can be said about actions, including agentic actions. That is, actions do not solely emanate from the intentional, subjective states of an individual; they are a product of a person's interactions and transactions with her or his social worlds. Viewing agentic action from the perspective of social constructionism immediately brings into consideration issues of power. Being able to take agentic action presumes that a person has some power to act in pursuit of her or his aims in relation to the opportunities and constraints in the social environment. Agentic action in a social constructionist perspective becomes essentially about empowerment and disempowerment. A social constructionist perspective raises the question as to whether social worlds empower or enable a person to take agentic action or are disempowering. In this section, I explore three different lenses through which to consider how social contexts and social worlds empower or disempower agentic action. These lenses include the perspectives of mental health, social structure, and the counseling relationship.

### ***A Mental Health Lens***

The literature on mental health and the practice of psychotherapy has been dominated by a pathological lens that focuses on the alleviation of psychological symptomatology as elaborated in the ever more complex renditions of the diagnostic manuals produced by the American Psychiatric Association (Lopez et al. 2006; Snyder and Lopez 2006). With the exception of the literature that has emerged in relation to feminism, multiculturalism, and social justice that brings to bear considerations of socially located empowerment and disempowerment, little attention is paid to issues of agentic action or empowerment in contrast to the focus on



symptom relief. The assumption appears to be that the alleviation of symptoms is tantamount to the restoration of mental health. Despite this bias, William and Levitt (2007), in a qualitative interview study of leading figures across a range of theoretical orientations, reported that the restitution of the capacity for agentic action was an important outcome of therapy above and beyond the amelioration of symptoms. The significance of the capacity for agentic action as a hallmark of mental health is further corroborated by Pollack and Slavin (1998) who describe the corrosive effects of traumatic experience on agentic behavior. With this in mind, personal problems and the psychological symptoms that accompany these issues may be construed as conditions of disempowerment with psychotherapeutic interventions across theoretical orientations construed as empowering practices, to the extent that they free people from these constraining influences and restore the capacity for agentic action.

Moreover, contemporary relational and self-psychological approaches suggest that the co-construction of lives and the creation of meaning, processes dependent on agentic action, are central to the healing that occurs in psychotherapy (Summers 2001; Wachtel 2008). So, it is not just that the capacity for agentic action is restored through the resolution of problems and amelioration of symptoms, but that engaging in agentic action is itself critical to the capacity to heal from problems rooted in the past.

Finally, narrative theory provides a way to integrate an understanding of how healing from problems rooted in the past is related to the emergence of agentic actions and story lines directed toward future lives. A number of scholars have noted that psychotherapy essentially is a narrative process in which people co-construct and reconstruct the narratives of their past, aiming for a more complete and integrated story of their lives (Hansen 2006; Polkinghorne 1988; Schafer 1976, 1992; White and Epston 1990). The co-construction of such stories, guided by therapeutic aims and the theoretical orientation of the therapist or counselor, which, in itself, entails a storyline about what causes problems in people's lives, is part and parcel of the construction of a more integrated and healthy self. From the previous discussion of narrative theory, we also know that the co-construction and reconstruction of the stories of the past is synergistically related to the emergence of the story lines and agentic actions directed toward the future. In this case, the process of overcoming psychological disempowerment is a powerful fulcrum for promoting empowerment through agentic action. For example, from a narrative perspective, the process of overcoming a history of depression through developing a more complete and coherent narrative of a past life inevitably engages a process of agentially co-constructing future life directions.

### *A Social Structural Lens*

In the contrast between agency or agentic action and social structure, agentic action usually comes out the loser, with social structure considered to have all the "muscle" with agency as its "weak-kneed cousin" (Hays 1994, p. 58). Another way

of saying this is that we tend to look on social structure as the more powerful constraining influence that effectively disempowers the possibility of agentic action. Social constructionism has contributed to this perception in its emphasis on the power of the social world to construct experience, especially in its analysis of the ways that power operates insidiously through discourse and language to construct and reconstruct hegemonic power structures. In this section of the chapter I would like to utilize the insights of a sociologist, Hays (1994), and a feminist theorist, McNay (2003), to develop a less dualistic understanding of the relationship between agentic action and social structure. I also discuss Polkinghorne's (2004) stance regarding the generative potential for counseling and psychotherapy to move beyond the more radical and personally disempowering social constructionists.

Hays (1994) seeks to collapse the analytic distinction between agentic action and social structure by conceptualizing them as deeply interdependent social processes. She conceives of social structure as a patterning of social life that exists outside of the individual but is essentially a product of individuals engaging in the myriad of social practices that constitute social life. Individuals construct the social structures in which they participate at the same time as they are constructed by these structures. Moreover, social structures are essential for any kind of action to occur. People cannot act in a vacuum without the assistance of social structure that provides the necessary patterning for action. So, although the issue of the ways in which social structures constrain individual agentic action tends to come to the fore in discussions about agentic action and social structure, it is important to acknowledge that social structures also enable action. We cannot act without social structure. Finally, Hays acknowledges that social structures exist at different levels and are more or less amenable to "human tinkering" (p. 58).

On the basis of these defining characteristics of social structure and agentic action, Hays (1994) distinguishes between structurally reproductive agency or agentic action in which people simply "habitually reproduce the prevailing patterns of social life ... yet are agents in that alternate course of action are possible and structurally transformative agency in which people affect the pattern of social structures in some empirically observable way" (p. 63). What is most important for our purposes here is to underline that people can behave agentially regardless of whether their actions are reproductive of or transformative of social structure. However, the potential always exists for transformation to occur, hopefully along lines of greater empowerment for those most disempowered by social structure.

Hays (1994) also makes an important contribution by distinguishing between two different components of social structure: one having to do with social relations characterized by power such as gender, race, and class, and the second having to do with culture or systems of meaning. Social structures participate not only in empowering and disempowering us, but also in "culturing" us. The meanings of our actions as well as the story lines of our narratives are provided by culture. This is a critical distinction for those who are committed to the empowerment of the less privileged. In addition to privilege and oppression, actions, and agentic actions are both shaped and constrained by cultures to which people are deeply attached.

For example, a person might eschew a course of action that could be empowering with respect to oppressive social structures in order not to risk disconnection from a valued culture.

McNay (2003) also disputes the ways in which the social constructionist lens has been used to describe human subjectivity as a passive construction of the social structure. In her analysis she uses the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to articulate the possibilities for a more active construction of human subjectivity and for the possibilities of transformative agentic action. A central construct in Bourdieu's theory is habitus that refers to the construction of the human body and the human mind by social structural norms. He evocatively refers to the sedimentation of the social structure in human minds. However, Bourdieu also postulates that social structures are constantly in flux, subject to competing and conflicting pressures. Human beings are embodied beings who live in time, are motivated to seek improvement in their lot in life, and can both anticipate and reflexively examine the consequences of their actions. They are not compelled to simply replicate the social structures they have internalized. They have the capacity to question and examine this internalization and the capacity to act otherwise, while at the same time their actions necessarily are constrained and limited by the social forces they both confront and which are embedded in their bodies and minds.

McNay (2003) effectively uses Bourdieu to open up a space within the social constructionist lens for structurally transformative agency in pursuit of social justice-oriented social change. This space is critical for the position espoused in this chapter that argues for the centrality of agentic action and also situates this agentic action fully in a social constructionist lens. What is especially useful in the work of both Hays (1994) and McNay is their non-dualistic understanding of agentic action and social structure. They both seek to avoid the trap of pitting agentic action against social structure. It is people who constantly create and recreate social structure through their social practices and it is people who have the power to transform these practices and structures.

Finally, Polkinghorne (2004) suggests that Foucault's contributions to an understanding of power and powerlessness have been misunderstood. Most cite his early works in which he developed his analysis of the invidious power of discourse to foster servitude to hegemonic power. In his later work, Foucault (Foucault et al. 1988; Foucault and Sennet 1982) was more sanguine about the possibilities for people to be self-constituting and self-constructing subjects. According to Polkinghorne, Foucault moved beyond his early position on human powerlessness in the face of social power to a position closer to Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) in which the human capacity for reflexivity enables human beings to, at least potentially, creatively author selves in defiance of deterministic social structures.

## ***The Counseling Relationship***

Although social constructionists posit that agentic actions always emerge or occur in relation to the social world with which a person interacts, the counseling and psychotherapy fields have elaborated this position more fully in their focus on

the significance of the relationship in counseling and psychotherapy. Within these fields, the intersubjective theorists most fully embrace the social constructionist position (Orange 2001; Stolorow and Atwood 1992; Stolorow et al. 2001). Their stance is that all experience and actions, including agentic actions, can only be understood as a function of the intersubjective fields that occur between people, in particular, in the case of the counseling relationship, between therapist and client. However, it is the relational-cultural theorists who are most responsible for describing the intersubjective connections between empowerment, defined as “the motivation and capacity to act purposefully” (Surrey 1987 p. 2), a definition close to the definition of agentic action in this paper, and an empathic relational context. Empathy can generally be defined as the capacity of the counselor or therapist to both apprehend and understand the experience of the client and to convey this understanding to the client.

Although empathy is broadly acknowledged to be a crucial ingredient in any successful or effective counseling or psychotherapy relationship (Bohart and Greenberg 1997; Carkhuff 2000; Watson 2002), the relational-cultural theorists have translated the significance of empathy into a powerful theory of human development (Jordan et al. 1991; Miller 1986; Miller and Stiver 1997; Surrey 1987). Their theory challenges the traditional view of development that understands the development of human autonomy and independence as a function of separation from the mother. Rather than postulating the capacity to act agentially as a result of a successful process of separation from a primary relationship, the relational theorists propose that the capacity to act agentially is a function of increasingly differentiated empathic relationships with significant others. Referring to the capacity to act agentially as empowerment, the relational theorists argue that empathic relatedness between partners in a relationship, or mutual empathy, leads to mutual empowerment of both partners. Thus, rather than a line of development conceptualized in relation to separation from others, their version of development posits that development occurs as a function of increasingly differentiated mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. According to these theorists, empowerment is a function of the empathic quality of the relationships within which a person is embedded. Although this version of developmental progression is offered as a general theory of human development, the relational cultural theorists are most interested in translating it into a useful clinical theory where the empowerment of clients, or the capacity of clients to act agentially, is conceived of as the outcome of mutually empathic relationships between both partners in the counseling or therapeutic endeavor.

What is especially useful in the work of the relational cultural theorists are the notions of connection and disconnection as these are applied to an examination of any one person’s web of relationships and to the counseling or psychotherapy relationship. In their theory, connection with another person means that qualities of empathy characterize the relationship with that person. Being empathically in tune with another person means being relationally connected to that person. Conversely, breaks in empathy, or the inability to apprehend another person’s perspective and experience, are referred to as disconnections. Disconnection signals a break in empathic relatedness and results in relational disconnection. Any one relationship may

be characterized as a complex mosaic of connections and/or disconnections. This powerful clinical theory is corroborated by the empirical work on the impact of relational connections and disconnections in silencing the self and depression (Jack 2011) and in the ability to make career transitions (Motulsky 2010).

Recent advances in relational–cultural theory have more deeply contextualized this work to take account of the social and cultural context of both counselor or therapist and client and the ways in which this context may contribute to relational disconnections (Jordan 1997; Jordan and Hartling 2002). In other words, the capacity to empathize with another who lives in a radically different social and cultural context is necessarily compromised. By insistently drawing attention to these disconnections and making them the focus of therapeutic inquiry, the presence and scope of empathic connection between counselor or therapist and client is constantly being challenged and hopefully enlarged. Identification of disconnection enables the struggle for recognition of the other and raises the possibilities for repair of the empathic tie. Most importantly, these recent advances in relational–cultural theory challenge the critique of the practice of counseling and psychotherapy as espousing a liberal, humanistic, and individualized notion of human beings that splits them from the social worlds in which they are, in fact, embedded (Cushman 1995; Richardson and Zeddes 2001; Sampson 1988).

A similar position is espoused by Sinclair and Monk (2011) who describe a practice they refer to as discursive empathy. Echoing the critique of counseling and psychotherapy referred to above, they note that empathy, as typically described, is central to a liberal, humanistic, and individualized practice of counseling and psychotherapy. Using the language of discourse analysis, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and positioning, they suggest another way to use empathy to bring the social and cultural surround directly into the heart of the counseling and psychotherapeutic relationship. Although their language is different, the results of discursive empathy are very much in accord with the efforts of the relational–cultural theorists to use empathy as a powerful tool to both empower clients and to help them to challenge the ways in which the social and cultural surround may be disempowering. These reformulations of empathy suggest that the counseling and psychotherapeutic relationship may be particularly useful in promoting the more active and socially conscious construction of subjectivity and personhood espoused by McNay (2003).

I do not mean to imply that the practice of counseling and psychotherapy is sufficient to promote social change. Clearly, social justice requires counselors and psychologists who are committed to social justice to engage in social change efforts beyond counseling and psychotherapy. I do mean to suggest, however, that counseling and psychotherapy have an important role to play in the continuum of transformed psychotherapeutic practices described by Smith (2010). The counseling and psychotherapy relationship is a powerful vehicle for helping to empower clients, that is, to help them engage in the agentic actions that will hopefully lead to the co-construction of meaningful lives in the face of both psychological and social disempowerment.

## Agentic Action and Identity in a World in Flux

To conclude, I turn to some thoughts about the significance of agentic action in relation to the achievement of identity in a world in flux. So far, the discussion of agentic action has focused on how important it is to be self-directed in a world with few scripts and signposts and that agentic action is essential to the evolution of the pathways in social contexts that constitute a meaningful life. Here I turn to the significance of being self-directed or capable of agentic action as a crucial component of identity formation. The notion of identity that informs this discussion is that “identity is the process of trying to make sense of ourselves in the world” (Suyemoto 2002, p. 76) and that processes of conflict (or the need to make choices among alternative courses of action) and commitment to these courses of action are critical features of the landscape of identity formation (Marcia 1993). This discussion of identity is also informed by a focus on the relationship between social practices and psychological processes (Ratner 1997).

The problematic nature of identity formation in a world in flux is explored by Cote and Levin (2002) who carefully locate the phenomenon of an achieved identity in relation to historical conditions. In pre-modern times, people were most likely to inherit their social statuses and, thus, were mostly likely to develop ascribed or foreclosed identities. There was no conflict regarding alternate courses of action because there were no alternatives. People did what they had to do to live a life. Commitment in such conditions was not particularly relevant. In modern times, as options about how to live one’s life began to open up, most particularly in the arena of vocational choice, the possibilities for an achieved, or constructed identity were in place. People could make choices about how to support themselves, about the ways to construct their personal lives, and about their set of personal beliefs and attitudes. Commitment to these choices made sense in a world that was relatively stable compared to contemporary times. In the contemporary world that can be described as a world in flux, an achieved or constructed identity becomes problematic due to the lack of stability in social structures. It is more difficult to commit to courses of action when the pathways and structures of life generated by these actions may be transitory. According to Cote and Levin, the danger in contemporary times is that people will not develop a commitment to their courses of action, but will develop outer-oriented situational selves, passively drifting through life with diffuse non-substantive identities based on the management of social images.

In response to this danger, Cote and Levin (2002) propose the construct of identity capital, a kind of capital that characterizes the ability to be self-directed and to make commitments to self in relation to the social world despite the transitory nature of the social world. While Cote and Levin tend to conceive of identity capital as akin to a set of characteristics that a person possesses, I would like to extend their idea to suggest that agentic action is a crucial component in the process of identity formation, especially as taking agentic action facilitates the ability to form a constructed or achieved identity characterized by conflict and commitment. Taking an action you want to take in pursuit of a life you want to live enables you to be more

likely to commit to the life pathways you are co-constructing, even though you may need to modify or change these life pathways and life commitments as your life course evolves. It is about the ability to be committed in the presence of instability or uncertainty.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the notion of action and especially agentic action enables us to situate processes of identity formation, or how we see ourselves in relation to the world, in relation to social practices. Rather than seeing psychological functions as somehow generated inside the mind, cultural psychology, influenced by the social constructionist lens, has led the way in proposing that psychological functions arise out of social practices (Bourdieu 1990; Dewey 1963; Luria 1971; Ratner 1997; Van der Veer and Valsiner 1991). How we do things in the world are social practices shaped by culture. Actions, in turn, feed into and constitute social practices. We can argue that our sense of identity in the world is an ongoing product of the actions, especially the agentic actions, that we take in relation to the social contexts and the social practices in which we participate and through which we seek to co-construct the kind of lives we want to live. Commitment to the life pathways co-constructed by agentic actions constitutes our social identities. Conceiving identity as an ever-emerging product of social interactions and transactions that have to do with how we see ourselves in relation to the social world leads to what might be called transactional identities, or identities based on and derived from action. Such a transactional identity has more to do with what we do than who we are, especially when what we do can be characterized as agentic action aimed at co-constructing lives we want to live. A focus on identity based more fully on what we do or the agentic actions we take in the world rather than on identity as indicative of some kind of individualized or essentialized self may be another way that the notion of agentic action enables some new understandings of developmental processes.

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## Chapter 5

# Motivation and Volition in Vocational Psychology: An Action Control Perspective

Jean-Paul Broonen

It is a well-known phenomenon that many clients have pervasive decision making difficulties when facing the challenge of career choice or transition (Chen 2006). When asked what they want to do, they face a difficult task to answer clearly because of their cognitive or emotional obstacles such as uncertainty, ambivalence, perplexity, or inconsistency. These difficulties are particularly well documented for adolescent populations (Busacca and Wester 2006) and university students (Amir and Gati 2006). Moreover, for many young people, structural barriers to career development such as societal or organizational factors that limit access to educational and/or occupational opportunity (Betz and Fitzgerald 1995), do not produce a favorable context for developing connections to future educational and vocational plans (Ogbu 1989). Now, the current rapidly changing occupational structure and the detrimental context of the economic crises of our globalized late modern society, especially the end of 2008 which marked the start of a global recession, dramatically add a factor of braking motivation. In a period of unemployment and poverty when “most working people do not have choices” (Blustein 2011, p. 316), how, and why, could they carefully prioritize and plan their actions to engage in a career decision making? How can more gifted students solve the paradox of being expected to construct their lives while finding a job is so difficult, even if making their first career decision represents for many young adults an intense task (Gati et al. 2003)? Since substantial effort to adapt to changing conditions is always required (Savickas 2013), this new phase of our occidental socio-economic history brings motivation more than ever in the foreground of career choice processes, either before or during career counseling.

Among the variables that compose motivation, goal-setting and goal striving clearly are important in the career decision making process (Bargh et al. 2010). But does motivation guarantee the initiation and pursuit of actions toward the goal

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of managing a career and its subgoals such as career exploration, self-exploration, and environmental exploration? The response to this question is clearly no. Motivation pertains to the *whys* of these activities. By contrast, volition determines which motivational tendencies are actually implemented and how the individual struggles to reach his or her goals. This chapter examines how the conceptual distinctions between both constructs applied to career decision making in the context of goal-directed action could bring a fresh view on decision and action in vocational theory and counseling.

## Motivation in Career Theories

The term “motivation” is used by social psychologists “to describe why a person in a given situation selects one response over another or makes a given response with great energetization or frequency” (Bargh et al. 2010, p. 268). Each response can have a cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestation. Answers to the question of what drives motivation in career decision making have historically been imported from the psychology of motivation and are dispersed in the body of vocational research. One of the most important frameworks in developmental and vocational counseling models for explaining motivational tenets of decision making consists in goal directedness and intentionality, as an essential component of agency (Bandura 1997, 2001). Goals or intentions are central constructs, although understood in various ways, in theoretical conceptualizations such as Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s social cognitive career theory (1994), Young and Valach’s contextual action theory of career (2000), Savickas’s career construction theory (2005), Richardson’s social/personal constructionist and relational understanding of intentional states (2004), the dynamic model of career choice development of Van Esbroeck et al. (2005), and life-designing paradigm (Savickas et al. 2009). Goals are also, with emotions and personal agency beliefs, a cardinal concept of Motivational Systems Theory (Ford 1992; see Gati and Tal 2008) that Vondracek and Porfeli (2008) consider deserving of application to the field of career development. In this chapter, I adopt the action perspective, where action is broadly defined as all activities directed toward an intended goal (see Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2008), as the lens for analysis.

Social psychologists (Atkinson 1957; Festinger 1942) had suggested that people weight the degree of incentive value of a desired outcome (the desirability aspect of the motivation) by the expectancy (the feasibility aspect of the motivation) that the outcome would actually be realized. This expectancy-value model of motivation was enriched with constructs coming from the cognitive revolution such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Bandura 1977, 1982) or control beliefs (Ajzen 1985). Applications to occupational decision making were derived from these variables (Battle and Wigfield 2003; Betz 2001; Creed et al. 2008).

As underlined by Bargh et al. (2010), two other important steps in the psychology of motivation were Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1969) suggestion that readiness to

produce a certain behavior could be conceptualized in terms of an individual's intention and Mischel's proposal (1973) to view such intentions as goals that imply meeting some standards (Locke and Latham 1990). Goal-directed behavior became a leading paradigm in motivational and developmental psychology (Bandura 1986; Blustein et al. 1999; Little 1998) and in vocational theory and research in particular (Dumora 2004; Husman and Lens 1999; Lent et al. 1994). In particular, work-related goals are recognized as important in the transition from school to work life (Nurmi et al. 2002). In this context, in order to establish a theoretical convergence of the vocational models in the 1990s (Savickas and Lent 1994), Lent et al. (1994, 1996, 2005) drew on Bandura's general social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) to develop an integrative social cognitive career theory where goals are a cognitive mediator and motivational self-regulator between antecedent factors (such as interests, self-efficacy, and outcomes expectations) and actions designed to implement goals. In this model, personal goals are viewed as "a critical mechanism through which people exercise personal agency or self-empowerment" (Lent et al. 2002, p. 263). Willingness and effort to transform career interests into goal choices and goals into action choices are explicitly invoked (Lent et al. 1994). When individuals do not transform goals into subgoals or actions and shrug from contextual barriers, encouragement is recommended during counseling, for instance, by reinforcing self-efficacy beliefs, helping to plan the steps of choice realization or investigating environmental resources. Until now, due to reasons of simplification, this unwillingness in the "efforts to implement goals" (Lent et al. 2002, p. 275) or the format of plans to be developed were not questioned in terms of an action control theory, that is, in terms of the mechanisms of action self-regulation by which the individual effectively copes with problems of initiating actions, persevering in the face of obstacles, shielding reaching the goal from distractions, and withdrawing from inappropriate means.

Project is another construct referred to in career literature in various meanings (Little 1998; Riverin-Simard 2000; Young and Valach 2004; Young et al. 2005), but always carrying notions such as intentionality, direction, and action. The latter is considered fundamental in so far as the notion of project contains "the idea of an essential link between some basic intention...and an action plan...to which the individual commits"<sup>1</sup> (Guichard 2007, p. 345). However, the *modus operandi* of such plans remains unexplained. Motivational sources of career behavior are also central in Savickas's career construction theory, the contextual action theory of Young et al. contextual action theory, and Richardson's metaperspective of contextualism for counseling practice. Additionally, in their dynamic model for career development, Van Esbroeck et al. (2005) insist on the decision activities of moving to action, for instance, in making plans for implementing preferences. In general, the importance of determining the feasibility of goals, making action plans, and selecting appropriate behavior for implementation is emphasized in main career developmental or counseling models. But why are plans conducive to goal attainment and what kinds of plans are conducive to such attainment?

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

## Coming Back to Volition

In the 1980s, several papers were published in the *American Psychologist* which addressed the question of volition as a possible object of an empirical science (e.g., Hershberger 1987; Howard and Conway 1986; Staats 1987). Remarkably, at the end of the seventeenth century, Locke (1971) had anticipated the issue of translation from goals to action with his definition of volition, that is, beginning or forbearing, maintaining, or terminating action:

“We find in ourselves a power to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or as it were commanding, the doing or not doing such or such a particular action. ...The actual exercise of that power, by directing any particular action, or its forbearance, is that which we call volition or willing.” (II, xxi, 5)

More than two centuries later, German psychologists (Ach 1935; Lewin et al. 1944) proposed new analyses of will after James’s (1890) mentalist position (see Gollwitzer and Oettingen 2001). Lewin et al. (1944) suggested adoption of a distinction between goal setting and goal striving to address the differential situation of goal. Goal setting was explained in terms of expectancy-value, but goal striving was explained in terms of the theory of tension systems (Lewin 1926). The term volition (*Wille*) was put forward to designate the latter form of motivation involved in regulating of how people try to arrive at their goals. Moreover, Lewin and colleagues pointed out that only an action perspective could illuminate this conceptual distinction.

In a very different way, Ach (1935) was interested in the formation of an intention. He posited that the degree of intensity of this process, identified as will, determined the degree of commitment and hypothesized that this process was independent of the motivational basis of intention. Preoccupied by the issue of goal striving, he also assumed that when a link is made between an anticipated situation and an intended behavior a “determination” is created, automatically triggering the intended action when specified concrete cues are encountered. While choosing between goals was related to motivational concepts, implementation of elected goals was a matter of willing. These ideas were forgotten during the behaviorist period, until the conceptual bases of volition came back into favor in both philosophy (see Zhu 2004) and psychology (see Broonen 2007; Kuhl and Beckmann 1985).

The way of German *Willenpsychologie* toward a modern action-oriented volition psychology was reopened by Kuhl (1983, 1984, 1985), Heckhausen (1987; Heckhausen and Kuhl 1985), and Gollwitzer (Gollwitzer 1990; Heckhausen and Gollwitzer 1987). Kuhl and Heckhausen are radically opposed to expectation-value theories as self-sufficient theories of action because they adopt a hedonistic conception of intention assuming that people do what they want the most to do. These scholars argue that this is confusion between motivation (desire to do something) and intention (to be in a state of commitment to a specific action). Indeed in many cases, an individual commits to an intended action, whereas a stronger motivational tendency would push him or her in another direction. Alternatively, an individual

may have positive attitudes and intentions directed toward a goal, but still lacks the volitional competences to transform intentions in behaviors.

A function of *volition*, a term presented as equivalent to *action control* or *self-regulation lato sensu* (see below), is to increase the motivational basis of an intention, referred to an action plan held in an active state (by contrast with the construct of goal referred to intended *outcomes*), if its low level prevents the person from winning in his or her fight against a dominant concurrent intention more attractive in the present. This meaning is thus larger than the usual one, which refers exclusively to engaging in aversive activities, though the term includes the latter. According to Kuhl's (Kuhl and Beckmann 1994) original action control theory, processes facilitating the enactment of intended actions are assumed to be activated in order to shield "difficult" intentions in memory from other competing tendencies. Difficult intentions are intentions that the person cannot (e.g., because several steps are necessary for execution) or should not implement without delay and, therefore, require an important amount of motivational energy or effort. Several strategies are described such as attention control, motivation control, emotion control, and environment control. Interestingly, these control mechanisms are assumed to be modulated by a state orientation versus action orientation variable (Kuhl 1981, 1994a; Kuhl and Beckmann 1994). This individual differential variable of volitional self-regulation mode of action may explain why two individuals sharing similar goals, abilities, and desire to achieve a good performance nevertheless do not attain the same level of performance. Individuals with a strong state orientation are characterized by a volitional self-regulation mode which prevents from change and is marked by an inability to exit from an unwanted state of affect with a tendency to ruminative thoughts about a past aversive experience or alternative goals or affective states, thus reducing the cognitive resources available for goal striving; at the opposite end of the spectrum, more action-oriented individuals are characterized by a change-enhancing volitional self-regulation mode which promotes change and is prone to dedicate through flexible regulation of their emotions and motivation their cognitive resources to task execution and goal attainment. Two<sup>2</sup> main distinct dimensions of this general construct were isolated: a *failure-related* form of action versus state orientation and a *decision related* form. The first dimension concerns the volitional mode of self-regulation (*lato sensu* see below) in front of threatening conditions such as an important change in life or failure, which affects processing information about some past, present or imagined future state, and contrasts the poles *disengagement* versus *preoccupation*<sup>3</sup>: state-oriented individuals have a

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<sup>2</sup> A third dimension, called volatility or capacity to leave the action-oriented mode when it is necessary and contrasting the *persistence* versus *volatility* poles, has been proposed by Kuhl: more state-oriented individuals are distracted even when they are focused on a necessary or interesting task, while more action-oriented ones are able to maintain an intention in memory during the time necessary to complete the task at hand. However, scale measuring this dimension lacks reliability and convergent validity with other measures of self-regulatory variables and the dimension itself seems less central than the two others (see Diefendorff 2004, p. 378, footnote 1).

<sup>3</sup> I adopt among several designations labeling for the state and action poles of Diefendorff et al. (2000).



tendency to persevere in thoughts associated with irrelevant concerns (often negative experiences), while action-oriented ones are more able to disengage from cognitions about undesirable events. The second dimension refers to the difficulty of initiating goal-directed action in the face of demanding conditions such as the complexity of the situation or the pressure of time, and contrasts the *initiative* versus *hesitation* poles: state-oriented individuals have a problem of initiating an already chosen task, remaining in a state of procrastination or lacking of energy that inhibits the implementation of their intention, while action-oriented ones easily initiate actions on the route to a goal. Using a revised form of the Action Control Scale (Kuhl 1994b), Diefendorff et al. (2000) demonstrated that the two scales measured a construct distinct from personality and cognitive ability.

### ***Kuhl's Personality Systems Interactions Theory***

The action versus state orientation multidimensional construct was subsequently integrated in a new theoretical development called Personality Systems Interactions theory (PSI; Kuhl 2000a, 2000b), which addresses two fundamental questions of motivation psychology. The first one concerns the degree to which explicit goal orientations and actions correspond with implicit motive dispositions; the second one through which functional mechanisms goals (or intentions) are, or not, implemented in behavior (Kuhl 2008). As far as the second question is concerned, PSI theory contends that motivations require a conceptualization of interactive systems where affect plays a central role. In this expanded theory, from the most abstract perspective, volition is conceived as a “central executive” (Kuhl and Fuhrmann 1998) which coordinates two tasks devoted to self-government: goal maintenance and self-maintenance. This coordination operates through processes spreading in an architecture of four cognitive interactive macrosystems. Goal maintenance is sustained by (1) the intuitive behavior control system (IBC), a completely implicit system which provides concrete behavioral routines (i.e., intuitive programs such as automatized speaking turns in conversation) for implementing intended actions; (2) the intention memory system (IM), a network of executive functions processing in a sequential analytical mode which is specialized in storing and inhibiting (by inhibition of the pathway to the IBC system) premature execution of rather abstract (i.e., nonreferred to their self-defining background) and explicit (i.e., conscious and verbal) representations of intended actions, eventually linked to an action plan. Self-maintenance is sustained by (1) the object recognition system (OR) which supports the detection of unexpected or undesirable “objects” of experience, that is, semantic or perceptual entities encoded as single units coming from external but also from internal world such as thoughts, feelings, or goals isolated from their contexts and possibly mismatching with representations in extension memory system (EM); (2) the EM, processing in a holistic parallel mode and implicitly ‘felt’, which is “the repository for extended networks of remote semantic associations such as meaningful experiences, options for action, personal values, and many other aspects of the ‘integrated self’” (Kuhl 2000a,

p. 670); the EM includes goals (i.e., representation of a desired outcome), values, and motive dispositions defined “as implicit cognitive–emotional networks of possible actions (derived from autobiographical memory) that can be performed to satisfy basic social needs” (Baumann et al. 2005); these largely implicit contents can become explicit if the person has the required explanatory skills.

At an intermediate hierarchical level of functioning, PSI theory assumes that affective states, defined as “biopsychological processes facilitating certain motivations and thus providing energy to perform related actions” (Kuhl and Quirin 2011, p. 76), modulate (a) the energy flow between the four macrosystems implied in motivational functioning and (b) volitional processes such that goal enactment and self-development can be achieved.

As far as volitional action is concerned (i.e., when intention and explicit plans control behavior), the change of the valence of affect is the functional key of the interaction of the IM and IBC systems on the one hand, and the EM and OR systems on the other hand, which are both connected on a basis of mutual antagonisms. The so-called first modulation assumption posits that the interplay between IM and IBC is coordinated by positive<sup>4</sup> affect: after formation of an explicit and in a symbolic format specified difficult intention related to achievement motive (but not to another motive such as the affiliation one) (Kazén and Kuhl 2005), the inhibition of positive affect, i.e., tolerance to frustration (e.g., under heavy demand of difficult tasks challenging the achievement motive), activates IM, which inhibits IBC and consequently maintains the conscious intention unexecuted. In a reverse form, when this inhibition is released by upregulation of positive affect (e.g., following the solution of a problem or in the presence of social support or by volitional self-motivation), connection between both systems is restored for facilitating implementation of the difficult intention over an easy response (volitional facilitation). Conversely, if IM is activated, positive affect tends to be reduced. State-oriented individuals are likely to be impaired in upregulation of positive affect (hesitation pole). The second modulation assumption posits that the interplay between EM and OR depends on negative affect: an excess on negative affect (e.g., after a distressing experience) inhibits the activity of EM, which activates the OR system, maintaining the isolation of new objects that cannot be integrated in the self. In a reverse form, downregulation of negative affect (e.g., by volitional self-relaxation) activates EM, which inhibits OR and consequently suppresses the unwanted or unexpected experiences. Conversely, if EM is activated, negative affect tends to be reduced. State-oriented individuals are likely to be impaired in downregulation of negative affect (preoccupation pole). Thus, capacities of affect regulation are important for goal enactment and self-development. Action-oriented individuals as opposed to state-oriented individuals

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<sup>4</sup> In the terminology of PSI, “positive affect” is used to refer to approach-related emotions such that high positive emotions consist of states like joy or pride and low (inhibited) positive emotions consist of states like frustration or apathy, while “negative affect” is used to refer to avoidance-related emotions such that high negative emotions consist of states like anxiety and low (inhibited) negative emotions consist of states like relaxation (e.g., Kuhl and Koole 2008). That is why the inhibition of positive affect, but not the induction of negative affect, is likely to activate the IM (Kuhl and Kazén 1999, footnote 1).

seem to differ not in their sensitivity to negative or positive emotions, but in their capacity to the self-regulation of these emotional valences.

Finally, exchange of information between IM and EM is a condition of generating self-congruent goals from representation of implicit motives with action-oriented individuals having developed greater abilities of emotional self-regulation. At the highest level of functioning, goal maintenance and self-development are controlled by self-regulation *stricto sensu* and self-control *stricto sensu*. In this restricted meaning, self-regulation is a largely unconscious mode of volition, though accessible to verbal consciousness and thus to control, “which processes and coordinates information from the internal systems (e.g., feelings, beliefs, values, needs) and from the (social) environment largely simultaneously (in parallel)” (Kuhl 2008, p. 306); Kuhl used the expression “inner democracy” to emphasize that this volitional mode leading to a decision is tended to autonomy and operates in a balancing way of taking into account sometimes contradictory “voices” coming from the individual’s own self and others’ demands. The short-form scale measuring self-regulation abilities for clinical or educational settings (Forstmeier and Rüdell 2008) specified attentional focusing, self-motivation, emotion regulation, self-activation, self-relaxation, decision regulation, and coping with failure. Individuals striving to achieve a desired goal matching their self operate in this self-regulatory mode of volition in a fluid manner even when the goal presents difficult aspects. Self-control *stricto sensu*, corresponding to the classical form of volition (cf. “will power”), is a conscious form of action control (“inner dictatorship”) necessary when hard tasks that are challenged by dominant incentives or habits are requested. This volitional mode of regulation is comprised of goal recollection, forgetfulness prevention, planning skill, impulse control, and initiating control. Though these competences can also be used in case of harmony between the goal and the content of EM, they are typically activated when negative affects are dominant due to a conflict between an assigned goal and fundamental self-components. Kuhl and Fuhrmann (1998) give the particularly suited example of a young woman enrolled, against her personal preferences, in medical studies to obey to her parents.

### ***Implications of Kuhl’s PSI Theory for Vocational Psychology Practice and Research***

Surprisingly, while job search efforts have been investigated in terms of action versus state orientation (Wanberg et al. 2010), no similar research can be found in the domains of vocational self-exploration and environment exploration, adjustment between explicit and implicit vocational goals, or vocational counseling. The differential cognitive self-regulation variable (action versus state orientation) should be considered in career counseling near personality variables such as conscientiousness, openness, and extroversion that presumably compose the construct of adaptivity (or willingness to change) suggested by Savickas and Porfeli (2012).

The domain could also benefit from an adaptation of the hypothetical cycle of conative (i.e., motivational and volitional) steps (causally reversible) that Kuhl (2000a) modeled to ensure academic success in learning situations. For example, as a first step, problem recognition such as the end of secondary school and transition to work or college (instead of passively remaining at home with parents) requires some sensitivity to negative affect ( $A^-$ ) which facilitates perception of the discrepancy between the EM and the OR systems. This negative affect must not persist as it is likely the case in state-oriented individuals. A change from  $A^-$  to  $A(-)$  opens a second step which involves setting a realistic goal and checking the compatibility between this goal and self-standards: access to EM (which “contains” personal standards and where implicit autobiographic episodes associated with emotional experiences are registered with the positive and negative consequences of various past actions) is facilitated by downregulation of negative affect [ $A(-)$ ] (2nd modulation assumption); matching a possible career goal (e.g., becoming a counselor) with self-aspects (own needs or values, norms, and others’ expectations) may result in self-compatibility, which launches an implicit self-motivation motion toward the goal (e.g., choosing psychology studies). However, anticipation of a precise succession of vocational choices (e.g., deciding between vocational and clinical psychology) is neither always immediately possible nor anticipated assurance of successful academic performance, thus generating uncertainty. Pursuit of this kind of difficult goals needs a translation of contents from EM to IM, which stores unexecuted abstract representations of intended actions (e.g., choosing a master’s degree program in vocational psychology or in clinical psychology and fostering the courage needed for studying), but at the condition of volitional inhibition of positive affect [ $A(+)$ ] (1st modulation assumption). This is a third step: an effective change from  $A(-)$  to  $A(+)$  implying a tolerance to frustration is necessary to activate the IM which maintains unexecuted difficult intentions until the opportunity of execution is at hand. Successful pursuit of the goal also requires self-regulation strategies, namely self-monitoring (step 4) and self-management of motivation and emotion (step 5). For instance, long-term vocational goals may be accompanied by a low self-efficacy (e.g., belief in not being capable to become a good counselor) or a fear of not maintaining sufficient motivation during one’s studies, which is a source of anxiety ( $A^-$ ). To detect this anxiety and its sources, self-monitoring must be activated. This process is tied to the function of vigilance which is a propriety of the EM whose access is facilitated by downregulation of negative affect [ $A(-)$ ]. After detection, control of self-confidence or self-motivation can be activated, for example by reminding oneself of the pre-eminence of the goal.

This illustration shows that the interplay of PSI macrosystems can inspire career research, particularly the Young et al.’s (2005) robust analyses relying on qualitative action-project methodology and identifying the ways of energizing action as an important question. By adding Kuhl’s functional approach, this illustration points to opportunities to recover the study of emotional barriers in the vocational domain (Valach and Young 2009) and to integrate the important role of emotion, particularly emotional regulation and control, in career parent-adolescent conversations (Young et al. 1997).

## *The Rubicon Model and Implementation Intentions (IMIs)*

In a general perspective on action as related to “meaning,” explained in Max Weber’s (1978) “*Sinn*” as characterizing all activities aiming to the attainment of an intended goal, Heckhausen and Gollwitzer proposed the Rubicon model of action phases (Gollwitzer 1990; Heckhausen 1987; Heckhausen and Gollwitzer 1987; see Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2008). This model attempts to both distinguish structural and functional episodes in the course of goal-directed action and unify motivation and volition in the same framework. It is composed of four structural consecutive phases—predecisional, preactional, actional, and postactional – dedicated to specific tasks to attainment of a goal that came out of desires, each of them separated by transition points which function as “qualitative leaps” (Heckhausen and Gollwitzer 1987, p. 103). The predecisional and the postactional phases are motivational ones. The preactional and the actional ones are volitional. Each function is associated with a specific mindset describing “a certain kind of cognitive orientation that facilitates performance of the task to be addressed in each action phase” (Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2008, p. 276). The predecisional phase is the first one during which the individual, generally keeping alive several competitive desires or wishes, has to decide which one he or she wants to accomplish. During this phase, a deliberative mindset characterized by an open-mindedness to information and a rather realistic processing of information (Fujita et al. 2007) is conducive to deliberation on desirability and feasibility of each nonbinding emerging wish. The transition from the predecisional phase to the preactional phase occurs when the individual turns one of his or her wishes into a binding goal phenomenologically accompanied by a feeling of determination to fulfill the victorious wish. The Rubicon is crossed. This metaphor means that the transformation of a desire, even fuelled by a high motivational tendency, into a concrete goal only arises in case of “a shift from a fluid state of deliberating the value of a potential goal to a firm sense of commitment to its enactment” (Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2008, p. 274). The individual enters the preactional volitional phase. The term “volitional” indicates that the task is now to commit to achieving a certain goal. However, in many cases, immediate enactment of newly set goals or intentions is not possible. Other activities must be completed or goal states specified by goal intentions, for example, becoming a physician, cannot be achieved instantaneously. The task is now to overcome the problems of goal striving: protecting from distractions, bypassing barriers, increasing effort in the face of obstacles (for a synthesis see Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006). If the cognitive functioning changes from a deliberative mindset to an implemental mindset characterized by an open-mindedness to information conducive to the goal and a positive biased perception of future performance, failing to get started is not scarce. More specifically, getting started may be blocked by the unusual aspect of the situation, for example, deciding about the transition from secondary school to higher education, or other attractive preoccupations, for example, having a relaxing summer instead of thinking on one’s future, or detrimental self-states, for example, defensive attitude in the face of career self-exploration.

Sheeran's meta-analysis (2002) showed that goal intentions accounted for 28% of the variance of the corresponding behavior across 422 correlational or experimental studies. However, the gap between goal intentions and action proportion remains important in terms of unexplained variance. This was confirmed in a meta-analysis of 47 experimental tests of the intention/goal-behavior relationship (Webb and Sheeran 2006), which established that only a small-to-medium change in behavior ( $d=0.36$ ) was consecutive to a change of the strength of the goal intention ( $d=0.66$ ). In other words, the idea that the act of will is included in forming a goal intention is sufficient to explain the occurrence of an ordered behavioral sequence designed to attain the goal is clearly erroneous. In order to "bridge" the gap between intentions and action, some additional psychological constructs are needed.

Gollwitzer (1993, 1996, 1999) suggested that forming a certain type of intention, namely an implementation intention (IMI), is a powerful self-regulatory strategy that alleviates obstacles. Whereas a goal intention, or goal in usual sense, is defined as a desired outcome or behavior (e.g., "I intend to achieve outcome X" or "I intend to perform behavior X"), an IMI has the format "If (when) I encounter situation Y, then I will initiate goal-directed behavior Z," additionally specifying when, where, and how a person intends to pursue the goal. For instance, an IMI serving the goal intention "I intend to think of a job as a physician" would adopt the form "If the doctor visits our home, I'll ask her questions about her job when she will have finished her examination."

A host of experimental and field studies in various settings (antiracist, prosocial, environmental, academic, consumer, health, and intrapersonal goals) has proved the power of IMIs, with a meta-analysis of 94 independent studies demonstrating the additional contribution of IMIs to goal achievement over and above the contribution by goal intentions alone (Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006). The results also provided strong support for the component processes of the theory, and for the different self-regulatory tasks in goal striving.

The psychological processes by which an IMI produces its effects on behavior relate to both basic components of the plan. First, the mental representation of a critical future situation specified in the *if*-component is supposed to become highly activated and the individual is, therefore, in a perceptual readiness to detect critical cues of the environmental situation. Second, creating a mental link between this specific future situation and the intended goal-directed behavior specified in the *then*-component of the plan strategically creates a delegation of a conscious and effortful control of action to specified environmental features, which relieves the effort and provides cues of automaticity to action, that is immediacy, efficiency, and alleviation of conscious control (Webb and Sheeran 2008). The result of an IMI is a commitment to perform the specified goal-directed behaviors when the critical situation is actually met. People are more prone to remember to act, suppress unwanted reactions, and block contextual influences and unwanted self-states, so that the pursuit of the goal is effectively shielded. Distinct brain neural correlates have been underscored by functional magnetic resonance imaging analysis (Gilbert et al. 2009) depending on whether performing a task is guided by goal intentions (lateral area 10), for which greater attention is required toward internal

representations, or by IMIs (medial area 10), involved in environmentally triggered behavior.

The actual initiation of the goal-directed behaviors marks the transition from the preactional phase to the *actional phase* during which the respective intention-related behaviors are executed. These two processes are controlled by the fiat tendency of the intention, that is, “the product of its volitional strength (i.e., the commitment to pursuing the goal state) and the suitability of the situation for its initiation” (Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2008, p. 275). Actional mindset associated with this phase is hypothesized to be similar to “flow experience” (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988), a state of absorption in action that prevents the individual to re-evaluate the goal or the self-regulation strategies chosen. Finally, in the motivational *postactional phase*, the task is to evaluate goal achievement, which is done by comparing what has been achieved and obtained with what was intended.

Moderators of deliberative and implemental mindsets have been found. For instance, failure-oriented individuals do not show the characteristics outlined, but those success-oriented do (Puca and Schmalt 2001). Individuals high in social anxiety do not show the effects, but individuals low in social anxiety do (Hiemisch et al. 2002). Moderators of the effects of IMIs have also been documented. Some of them are important for the potential application of IMIs in career counseling. Difficult goals benefit more from IMIs than easy ones, which do not require IMIs (Gollwitzer and Brandstätter 1997). IMIs have more positive effects on goals boosted by intrinsic motivation (high autonomy) than on goals reinforced by extrinsic motivation (low autonomy) (Koestner et al. 2002). The strength and activation status of the goal commitments impact on the strength of IMIs (Sheeran et al. 2005). However, the reverse effect has never received any empirical support: the strength of IMIs has no impact on the strength of goal commitment. This result is consistent with the subordination of IMIs to goal intentions.

Importantly, it is possible to teach individuals about forming IMIs. Since IMIs are a self-regulation strategy for goal striving and since the latter is necessarily linked to an effective goal setting, only a self-regulatory strategy that encompasses goal setting and goal striving is conceivable. Technique of mental contrasting with IMIs is such a coping strategy. Desire and a positive self-efficacy to attain a goal may not be sufficient to commit oneself to realizing this desire if obstacles stand in the way of goal realization. First, imagining benefits of attaining the goal and next reflecting on the present obstacles to this goal create an association that induces a necessity to move from the present to the desired future and to produce an instrumental goal-directed behavior (Oettingen et al. 2001). A condition for this effect to appear is that the individual’s self-efficacy strength for attaining the goal is high (Oettingen et al. 2012). Mental contrasting that provides firm commitment to the goal can then be combined to IMIs that require such a commitment to be effective. Second, the obstacles identified in mental contrasting can be introduced as cues in the if-then plans (Adriaanse et al. 2010).

### ***Implications of the Rubicon Model for Vocational Psychology Practice and Research***

Two main kinds of effects of IMIs have been documented in various domains: promoting wanted behavior and controlling unwanted behavior. The first kind of effect concerns (a) stimulating the initiation and execution of goal-directed actions such as increasing the likelihood of participating in cancer screening and (b) stimulating maintenance of goal-directed actions such as engaging in physical exercise after cardiac surgery. The second one concerns (a) eliminating unwanted thoughts, feelings, and actions such as shielding intentions against distraction when confronted with complex tasks; (b) inhibiting an unwanted behavior such as blocking the activation of prejudice; and (c) shielding wanted behavior from unwanted internal influences, for instance, self-states such as low self-efficacy, or unfavorable external influences, for example, competing goals (for a synthesis see Achtziger and Gollwitzer 2008).

Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) encouraged testing applications in new domains. In the applied setting of continuing education (Brandstätter et al. 2003), East German participants were invited to indicate whether they had decided to continue their education and whether they were forming an IMI to achieve that educational goal with respect to their professional career. Two years later, it was verified whether an educational retraining had been initiated. If participants had formed a goal intention that was complemented by an IMI, they were more successful in initiating vocational retraining compared to participants that had only formed a goal intention. In another study (Oettingen et al. 2000), adolescents who had to build up an educational goal (composing a CV) with relevant IMIs were more successful in achieving their goal than students who only formed a goal. Support was also found for the mediating role of IMIs in the relation between job search intention and job search behavior (van Hooft et al. 2005). However, until now, the vocational domain is under-explored in this respect.

The application of IMIs to other vocational settings needs attention. For instance, students in the last years of secondary school who seek help because of vocational indecision may have difficulties in executing means-end strategies to reach a career goal such as finding more information on courses, programs, or an occupation (referring to books, the Internet, experts, and so on), self-exploration, planning to meet with professionals to gain a better view on specific occupational activities, and enrolling in preparatory university modules. Helping students to consciously form specific IMIs during counseling should enhance corresponding executive behaviors. When I inserted action control in my counseling practice, I realized that concerned students were eager to apply this psychological tool. The very problem of attending the initial vocational counseling appointment could be addressed via IMIs. It is noteworthy that forming IMIs designed to fight against negative feelings, for example, embarrassment due to exposure of one's vulnerabilities to the public or self-stigma if help is sought from a psychologist associated with scheduled



appointments for psychotherapy, increases attendance (Sheeran et al. 2007). Knowing that most students do not seek help when facing decisional difficulties – hardly more than 6% of college students seek advice from career services (Fouad et al. 2006) – formation of IMIs could facilitate utilization of vocational services.

Interestingly, a promising way to form strong IMIs could be a collaborative one which involves two individuals in the planning, for instance a mother and her daughter (e.g., “If it is Saturday afternoon, we will attend the career service of the university to discuss my/your future”). This type of intervention has proved to be successful in some health behaviors (Prestwich et al. 2005). Though the underlying mechanisms associated with positive effects remain unclear (Prestwich et al. 2012), it can be recommended by front line educational staff in order to promote attending vocational counseling. It may be beneficial to envisage a link between the intervention of collaborative IMIs and the joint actions engaged by several participants in counseling to explore possible futures seen as bringing one of them closer to their goals (Young and Valach 2004). Research criteria inspired by Young et al. (Young and Domene 2010; Young et al. 2001) and the action-project method would be well suited to the analysis of how collaborative IMIs could be formed in vocational counseling. A flexible research methodology, which integrates the IMIs model, is implied by an ecological approach which welcomes disciplines other than vocational psychology (Valach and Young 2009); the introduction of the action phase’s model, especially the IMIs, which originates from social psychology would be a promising response to this call. Of course, there is a need to empirically test the effectiveness of IMIs in the vocational domain.

More generally, the architecture of other leading vocational theories is open to the introduction of action control. Social cognitive career theory could benefit from inserting IMIs in the action component of action choice processes, which is designed to implement the choice. The importance devoted to turning intention into action in career construction theory – cf. “Through action, not verbal expressions of decidedness, clients engage the world” (Savickas 2013, p. 168) – could also incorporate volitional tools. Finally, for the life-designing paradigm, an important role of the counselor is to help foster the acting power of the client.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, attempts to show that action control seems promising for vocational theory and counseling practice and research have been made. In vocational counseling, considering turning intentions into actions is a crucial point in a period when altering prior career projects is a consequence of the economic recession, which, in turn, activates many resistances. Indeed, the present economic context does not facilitate construction of vocational options. There is little doubt that uncertainty about future and threats of unemployment will hang more and more over vocational prospects. Difficulties of commitment to concrete action choice for undertaking

educational training or choosing a job will not decrease in the near future with a correlative lowering of motivation and raising of emotional barriers. Consequently, research that tests the impact of specific approaches of volition, namely the state versus action orientation variable and its integration in PSI theory, and IMIs into the Rubicon model, on vocational behaviors should retain the attention of scholars in the field. In the case of difficult intentions in counseling practice, concerned participants could benefit from an approach that considers differential emotional responsiveness as an important parameter of individual functioning of self-control and self-regulation, for instance in terms of intention, memory activation, or inhibition, activation or inhibition of positive affect, activation of extended memory, switching from awareness of difficulty (inhibited positive affect) to self-motivation and vice versa, and so forth.

Another potent volitional tool for clients consists in consciously forming IMIs, while receiving support through empathetic listening, bringing forth self-supportive statements, and responding to resistance, for instance, as illustrated by facilitating conditions of *motivational interviewing* (Miller and Rollnick 2002). The latter has been proved to be a fruitful technique leading to more detailed and pertinent IMIs than in a standard self-administered planning sheet condition in health behavior change (Ziegelmann et al. 2006). Action control models presented in this chapter are rooted in social, clinical, and experimental psychology, and in neuropsychology. Adopting volitional tools in career counseling and research would be an additional way to meet the Valach and Young's (2009) call for interdisciplinarity in vocational guidance.

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## Chapter 6

# Processes of Identity Construction in Liquid Modernity: Actions, Emotions, Identifications, and Interpretations

Jean Guichard and Jacques Pouyaud

The last three decades have witnessed major economic and cultural globalization brought about by the development of information technologies and transportation. This process has had major repercussions, not only on many aspects of individual daily lives in the Western societies, but also—more fundamentally—both on their “assumptive form world” (to use the concept created by Cantril in (1950) and on the way individuals can picture their further life-course. Bauman (2000) forged the concept of “liquid modernity” to summarize these deep transformations. During these last 30 years, we moved from a solid modernity to a liquid one: modernity where institutions, organizations, and systems of beliefs do not have time to solidify.

In the first part of this chapter, we intend to discuss one consequence of liquid modernity, that is, that individuals must now cope more frequently with career and personal issues that differ from those they faced within the solid modernity context. What used to be career development issues are now transformed into questions about the job pathways individuals need to construct and integrate in lives that are meaningful to them. These questions about occupational pathways arise in a context where life courses appear to be more uncertain, featuring many more breaks than previously, and where life meaning must be built on multiple changes, including psychological ones, body ones, material ones, shifts in the interactions with others, in emotional states, in health and life conditions, in habits, in values, and in life roles.

In such a liquid context, career counsellors can less and less confine themselves to deal only with their clients’ career management issues. More and more frequently, they have to tackle the “why” question (Arthur and Rousseau 1996); that is, to investigate the contribution of any commitment or change in work or in other life domains to the meaning their clients give their lives. In addition to these issues of

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“knowing what, who, and why” (Arthur & Rousseau), career counsellors need to consider with their clients the function of their doing—of their action—in these change or commitment processes. Thus, career counsellors become life designing counsellors (Savickas et al. 2009): the topic of the life designing factors and processes—notably via language and action as meaning makers—is now at the very heart of their interventions.

During recent years, plenty of research has dealt with this issue. Most of it is distinct from previous works as it considered human subjects from a new perspective: they were described as less “monolithic” than previously. Rather they were depicted as being able to be and act in quite different ways according to the contexts of interaction; they were also described as better able to reinterpret their previous experiences and narrate them to define future prospects that allowed them to give their current lives direction. The model “making oneself self” (*se faire soi*) (Guichard 2004, 2005, 2007), which is summarized in the second part of this chapter, outlines a synthesis of these contemporary analyses that can be used as a theoretical basis for counselling (Guichard 2008).

This model emphasizes two kinds of reflexivity, the tensions and modes of combinations of which are at the very heart of these self construction processes. One of them refers to identification process, which is a stabilizing factor. The other is an indefinite process of re-interpretation and of building potential future prospects on one’s past and present experiences. As different examples stemming from recent research show that individuals appear to combine these two kinds of reflexivity in different ways in view of either sketching, defining, or specifying their future prospects (Bangali 2011; Bangali and Guichard 2012; Piraud 2009).

Nevertheless, the model *making oneself self* concentrates mainly on an understanding of the cognitive processes of meaning-making via language. However, during counselling interventions, the issue of action also arises: how does action—the implementation of self—also contribute to the construction of self? Other constructivist approaches, notably contextual action theory (Domene et al. this volume; Valach et al. this volume; Young and Domene 2011; Young et al. 2002; Young et al. 2011) stresses that it is also “in acting that we construct our lives, including our career life” (Young and Domene 2011, p. 30). Considering action as a multilevel system directed by co-constructed (joint) goals, this theory allows the processes of making a sense of self as an individual construes through action, projects, and career, to be approached in a way complementary to the cognitive reflexivity processes described by Guichard (2004, 2005).

Third part of this chapter aims to establish a link between these two perspectives, in showing how the two reflexivity processes can be understood through the different levels of action. Such connection aims eventually to support new kinds of counselling interventions. If, indeed, the core issue of contemporary career counselling is to help “individuals best design their own lives in the human society, in which they live” (Savickas et al. 2009, p. 4) and help them to do it in an active way, then career counselling interventions need to rely on the two means of construction of self: language and action.

## Characteristics of Today's Affluent Societies and Their Consequences on the Conception of the Human Subject

### *Liquid Societies and Flexible Organizations*

Most sociological analyses converge (to name an outstanding example, Giddens 1991) on the fact that today's affluent societies are more fluid, varied, and complex than they were only half a century ago. Within these societies, various cultural models, some of which are dominant, co-exist. Different lifestyles are available, some of which are more valued than others. Social norms about the "right" way to direct one's life are more open to challenge than before. Thus, our societies no longer provide their members with a set of established and indisputable referents allowing them to know, once for all, how to direct their lives.

At the same time, our societies are centered on work. Most individuals can only make a living by exchanging their work for remuneration. As job security has decreased, finding and retaining employment is a major concern for a large part of the population. Therefore, where work and employment intersect, career plays a central role in many people's lives (Clot 1999). In addition, we carry out this work in increasingly complex organizations. These circumstances require the ability to adapt to roles, develop skills, and construct representations about ourselves, such as self-efficacy beliefs or interests. Contemporary work organizations also differ notably from earlier organizations (Askenazy and Caroli 2010; Ashkenas et al. 1995) insofar as they tend to entrust small teams, formed for the duration of a specific assignment, with the responsibility for production. These teams must organize themselves to achieve assigned goals. The organizations offer less predefined career perspectives. They call on peripheral workers employed for a limited period of time when required by short-term economical interests. In relation to these new forms of work organization, the *psychological dimension* of the employment contract has changed (Rousseau 1995; Sels et al. 2004). Companies are no longer expected to secure their employees' future within the organization. Reciprocally, employees are not expected to plan their future within the company. Careers are now described as *protean* or *boundaryless* (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Hall 1976, 2002). This means that careers are mainly based on individual decisions, particularly, on the capacities of individuals to invest their capital of skills judiciously, according to the opportunities they can identify. To summarize, both the current work organization and the more general context of our societies offer individuals less predefined frameworks that could provide them with established life bearings. This is precisely what Bauman (2000, 2007) describes when he defines "liquid modernity" as a major feature of our societies:

Bauman sees liquid modernity not so much as a world of egocentric individuals who shape their lives as personal projects made through their own imaginings about the possibilities that the world out there has to offer, but one in which men and women are reflective moral agents who leave in an uncertain world which means that they are forced in the quotidian of their day-to-day lives to contemplate their existential insecurities. (Blackshaw 2007, p. 10)

These societal and organizational changes have had two major consequences with regards to vocational development interventions.

### ***A Transformation of the Vocational Development Issues Faced by People***

The first consequence is that the vocational development issues people face have become more complex, vaster, and deeper than previously. They are more complex because what was a vocational choice at the beginning of the 20th century, and had become a career development issue in the 1950s, now is described as individuals' capacity to invest their competencies in work assignments that they consider beneficial to themselves (Arthur 1994; Arthur and Rousseau 1996).

Vocational issues are also vaster as, on one hand, such work investments require people to be able to examine all aspects of their lives and assess the career capital (in terms of knowing how and knowing who) that they have constructed. On the other hand, to make up their minds, people also need to answer the question of *knowing why* (DeFillippi and Arthur 1996): this means they have to think about what makes their lives meaningful, determine their life priorities (priorities that will need to be redefined during the life-course) and the style of life that they yearn for.

Finally, these issues have become deeper. As already mentioned, today's flexible organizations and liquid societies do not provide people with indisputable life models. They have—at least partially—to decide these by themselves, though definitely as a result of interactions with others. They, therefore, have to determine for themselves the fundamental values and key elements that give their life meaning and direction. Dealing with these decisions is now a major developmental task of emerging adults. All these reasons lead to the assertion that vocational development has become a life-designing issue (Savickas et al. 2009).

### ***A New Look at Human Development***

The second consequence of the societal and organizational changes mentioned earlier is that social and human sciences have changed the way they conceptualize human development. There are indeed strong and converging indications that these new possibilities for action that are socially given to individuals have led social and human scientists to redefine the perspectives from which they study the development of human subjectivity. As Gergen (1991) wrote: "Postmodernism does not bring with it a new vocabulary for understanding ourselves, new traits or characteristics to be discovered or explored. Its impact is more apocalyptic than that: the very concept of personal essences is thrown into doubt" (p. 7). Previous psychology literature indeed emphasized the stability and the uniqueness of the human subject. Gergen stressed it was based on a "rhetoric of autonomous and enduring dispositions" (1991, p. 45). Individuals were seen as people endowed with steady features

(such as personality traits, a certain IQ, some fundamental life values, etc.) and behaving in a similar manner—such as being an introvert—in different contexts. This research insisted on the role of past conditioning, interactions, and personal issues in current behaviors and representations. The explanations they offered were satisfactory in the context of the steady and homogeneous societies of the time.

In contrast, contemporary research underlines the plurality of individuals, their relative malleability, and their capacity to take a reflexive stance on their experiences, a capacity that endows them with self-determination ability. In addition, these approaches stress the major importance of ongoing interactions and dialogues in the construction of individual subjectivity. These models, which may be categorized under the generic terms of constructivist and constructionist (Hartung and Subich 2011; McMahon and Watson 2011; Young and Collin 2004), also put the emphasis on the future. Thus, they emphasize the symbolization or narrative power of individuals, a power that allows them to determine by themselves future perspectives that are not simple products of their past conditioning and challenges.

## A Self Construction Model

More and more frequently, career counsellors refer to this new perspective on human construction as they design interventions to match the needs of the uncertain individuals living in liquid modernity. As Sugarman (2003) underlines (quoting Datan et al. 1987, p. 154), they place an emphasis on

a more descriptive work, including a more systematic use of autobiography, storytelling and conversation, diaries, literature, clinical case histories, historical fiction, and the like, with a new emphasis upon the person's construction and reconstruction of the 'life story', rather than what might be considered a more objective account of what happened. (p. 103)

The *making oneself self* model (Collin and Guichard 2011; Guichard 2004, 2005, 2009; Guichard and Dumora 2008) is a synthesis of different approaches (sociological, cognitive, dynamic, semiotic, and so forth) to these phenomena of putting into perspective and narrating one's life; a synthesis that aims to provide a conceptual framework for the life designing counselling interventions.

This synthesis describes individuals in postmodern societies as plural beings who unify themselves by linking up their various life experiences from the perspective of some major future prospects that give their lives significance and meaning. Indeed, as already noted, in these societies, individuals interact and dialogue in settings that are not necessarily consonant with each other. They hold roles that vary from one setting to another, as they act and interact often in ways relatively specific to each of them. Individuals then develop a repertoire of more or less varied and heterogeneous experiences that lead them to construct diverse representations of themselves.

## *Individual Identity as a System of Subjective Identity Forms*

To depict this plurality, the *making oneself self* model describes an individual identity as a dynamic system of subjective identity forms. The central concept is then that of subjective identity form (SIF) (Guichard 2004). This concept aims to describe a *self* that an individual constructs and performs, has constructed and performed, or expects to construct and perform in a certain setting.

A subjective identity form may be defined as a set of ways to be, act and interact in a certain setting, in connection with a certain view of oneself in this setting, of which the individual is more or less clearly aware. A SIF can be described, in a more detailed way, as a set: (1) of actions and interactions (that generally correspond to some scripts of action and relate back to knowledge, knowing-how, knowing how to be, or mindsets), (2) of ways to relate to the “objects” and to the other people (of ways to interact and dialogue with them), and (3) of ways to relate to oneself (that lead to the construction of self-observations generalizations, of self-efficacy beliefs, of a certain self-determination feeling, of a certain self-esteem, etc.) in the same setting.

Insofar as individuals generally interact in various settings that are not always consonant with each other, what is usually named an individual identity should better be described as a system of subjective identity forms. Some relate to present contexts of activities, others relate to past interactions and interlocutions that still play a role in the individual’s current life, and still others to future expectations that allow the person to provide this system with a unity anchored in a certain future perspective.

Some descriptions borrowed from the scientific literature illustrate what may be the SIF system of an individual at a given period of his/her life. For example, in using some descriptions by Jellab (2001) of vocational high school students, the ideal-typical case of one of them may be outlined. Through the activities he engages in as a high-school student in electronics, this young man—born in France to an immigrant family—constructs and views himself in a certain high-school student SIF. This SIF corresponds to a “reflexive way to relate to knowledge.” This means that this young man prefers reflection when he is confronted with practical exercises (to him, doing does not mean repeating an operation learned by heart, but understanding why this operation needs to be done this way on this occasion), that he puts himself more in abstract knowledge than in occupational knowing how, that he gets involved more in schoolwork than in workshop, and so forth. This high-school SIF of a student more interested in general knowledge corresponds to a certain view of oneself: this adolescent considers himself as “competent” (“good”) in the abstract disciplines (notably math) he values (self-efficacy beliefs). More globally, he sees himself as a gifted and hard-working student (self-esteem), and thinks his school future depends on himself (self-determination). In connection to this current SIF, this young man constructs a certain expected SIF: he imagines himself in the future as a college student in the domains of electronics or information processing.

Nevertheless, this young man's present life is not confined to such a student experience. One may imagine, for example, he works during weekends for a home computer assistance small enterprise. On the occasion of this activity, he performs and constructs a SIF different from the one related to his current school experience. In this setting, he indeed sees himself as able to diagnose a problem quickly and explain it easily to customers, and as knowing how to fix it. He has good relationships with almost all of the customers, and has the impression that a few of them would be happy to help him on some occasions, for example, find a practicum, a summer job, or get information on a course. During these activities, this young man acts and perceives himself in the following way: he constructs self-efficacy beliefs that differ from the ones he developed at school, he becomes aware of other social networks, and so forth. All these are the constituents of another SIF, which, in this example, is consonant with the high-school one.

At a given time in an individual's life, a certain SIF generally holds a more central place than others. This central SIF refers most often to a life domain—an activities domain (Almudever et al. 2007)—in which the person wants then to excel or to achieve a certain ideal. In adolescents and emerging adults, it is usually related to a certain expected SIF. For example, Piriou and Gadéa (1999) showed that French sociology students who succeeded in their studies pictured themselves in the SIF of a sociologist. They built a clear image of this figure, an image that matches the portrait depicted in the media and intellectual circles of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, that is, a great researcher leading rigorous studies based on a very well define conceptual apparatus and a person committed to protest actions in order to construct a fairer society. This ideal to be attained often refers back to some past experiences that played an important role in individuals' lives: experiences that brought them to construct some fundamental values (Schwartz 1992; Super et al. 1995) or life themes (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979; Savickas 2005, 2011). These values or life themes, integrated and reinterpreted within the frameworks of their current and expected experiences and activities, contribute to providing the individuals with a meaning. In the model proposed here, these past experiences leaving their marks on the present are named "past SIF."

In the preceding example of a vocational student who is more interested in abstract knowledge than in know-how, his high school student SIF appears to be central as it is related to major expectations. Indeed in connecting Jellab's (2001) observations and Zéroulou's (1988) research about school success in immigrant children, one may suppose that this young man constructed, during his childhood, a set of representations, scripts of actions, mindsets, and expectations that correspond to a past SIF which could be named "son of immigrants who were expecting social inclusion and a rise in social status for their children." Indeed, Zéroulou showed that migrant families whose children succeed at school tend to share some common features: parents have urban origins and were schooled when they were children, they expect social success via school work (and, more generally, they value well-conducted work), they show a strong interest in their children's school work and organize the best possible conditions to help them complete their home work, to which they pay careful attention. These are the expectations, views, and mindsets

this young man adopted. They still play an important role in his current life and help him to design it. They notably make him consider vocational high-school as “a new departure” (Jellab 2001) towards tertiary education.

### *The Dynamism of the Subjective Identity Forms System*

The subjective identity forms system is not static. It changes according to the events that impinge on individuals' lives, in connection with the activities, interactions, and interlocutions in which they become involved. For example, a particular SIF—central at one time—may become peripheral at a later time, as it is observed, for example, in people who have devoted themselves to educating their children begin new activities—sometimes very different from the previous ones—when these children become adults. For example, Levinson and Levinson (1996) concluded that “as family became less central, the homemakers [in Levinson and Levinson research: women] turned mainly to occupation for new interests, activities, and sources of satisfaction” (p. 191). Levinson and Levinson observed three main patterns of changes: some women made occupation central, some others gave occupation a moderate but significant place in their lives, and a small group (about 20%) expanded their leisure activities without pursuing an occupation. Some psychosocial transitions (Anderson et al. 2011; Parkes 1967) induce major modifications to an individual's SIF system. As is explained later, other transitions have a weaker impact; they result merely in a certain transformation of one or more SIF's.

A review of the psychology literature from the end of the 19th century to the present leads to postulate that the dynamism of the SIF system—therefore of self-construction—originates in the tensions and the diverse modes of combining two types of reflexivity that constitute the self. This literature shows two major currents which date back to James (1890) (and previously to René Descartes) for the first major current, and the other major current dates back to Peirce (as cited in Atkin 2010) and Cooley (1902) (and likely farther back to Giambattista Vico).

The first current emphasizes the dual process of relating from oneself to oneself, that is, the self being then conceived as a reflexivity I—me, to use James' terminology (1890). “I” synthesizes all his/her past and current experiences (“me”) from the perspective of expectations about him/herself in the future linked to identifications with pictures of others, for example, role models, or to big ideals (Erikson 1959; Lacan 1977).

In contrast, the second current stresses a ternary relation to oneself on the occasion of intra or inter-personal dialogues. In these dialogues, the other is not an idealized mental image which fascinates the individual and according to which he/she dreams to become. Rather, it is another “I”: a “you” who grants to the person a capacity (1) to distance him/herself from his/her past and current experiences, as well as from his/her crystallized future expectations, that are then considered as those of “he/she” and (2) to enter in a continuing process of self-interpretation, opening up to some potential future prospects.



Wiley (1994) tried to unify these two currents. He achieved it only in reducing the first one to the second. He asserted that a fundamental process emerges: a ternary reflexivity that individuals articulate in their minds where their own points of view of “I” with the system of the other “I” that form a human society. This ternary reflexivity—the one described notably by Mead (1934) in his model of generalized other—would lay the foundation of an infinite process of self-interpretation and self-development. Such a reducing is possible only if the other “I” is considered merely as one of the possible figure in a narration (one of these multiple “I” of the “dialogic self” described by Hermans and Kempen in 1993). But “I” may also apply to a certain figure which plays a specific role in the individual’s mind: “I” refers then to a certain other that fascinates him/her and according to whose picture he/she dreams to design his/her life. It is very precisely this specificity of the identification processes—with the risks of alienation they encompass—that Malrieu (2003) showed in his analysis of the Waffen S.S. General Ohlendorf’s biography narratives. Ohlendorf’s identity, that is, his SIF system, was structured by the irremovable ideal to achieve being Hitler’s most perfect follower, as he revealed it during the Nuremberg trial, where he was sentenced to death.

### ***Ternary Reflexivity, Interpretation, and Construction of Potential Future Prospects***

The ternary type of reflexivity is a “person dialogic interpretation” process. Anchored in semiotic processes, it refers to the concept of “person” as it was described by Peirce (as cited in Colapietro 1989) and developed by Jacques (1991). According to these two authors, the person is both supra-individual (or interpersonal) and intra-individual. It is a continued dialogic process that articulates the three positions of the “I,” of the “you,” and of the “he/she.” Thus, each speech act (or speech turn) can take the form of either an “I” that tells “you,” or of a “you” who answers “I,” or of an “I” and “you” who refer to he/she. Each statement leads then to the production of a certain “interpretant,” that is to say of a certain understanding of the statement, and not of an understanding of what this statement might definitively mean (Atkin 2010). Each interpretant is taken up again during the following speech act or speech turn, which leads to the production of a new interpretant. This type of reflexivity enables individuals to engage in an indefinite process of interpretations and re-interpretations of their past and present experiences that lead them to sketch out, and sometimes specify, new potential future prospects.

Thomas’s case (Piraud 2009) illustrates this phenomenon of ternary reflexivity. Thomas was a senior high school sophomore in a science program who had entered amateur racing cyclist activities. For years, he trained while picturing himself in the future wearing the yellow jersey on the Tour de France podium. In reference to the model outlined here, one may assert that Thomas’s identification with the character of the Tour of France winner, via a dual reflexivity process described, notably, by

Dumora (1990) as a “desire to be like,” led Thomas to commit himself to intense physical activity to be prepared for the racing cyclist job.

At the beginning of his sequence of counselling which comprised six interviews lasting about 1 h each and spread throughout the course of a year, Thomas realized that, in spite of his considerable efforts, for example, that prevent him from going out with his buddies, he will never achieve his dream of wearing the yellow Tour de France jersey. At best, he will run in a professional team pack, which is a prospect he cannot accept. The first interview deals mainly with the issue of how to announce this conclusion to his trainer, who—Thomas said—considered him a little bit as his own son. Indeed, it seems that the trainer identified Thomas as the marvelous son—the Tour de France winner—he never had.

Over the course of counselling, Thomas produced a large series of interpretants—in this case of possible prospects—allowing him to order in various ways some events that characterized his past experiences: events he selected, weighted, and articulated in a specific way on each occasion. This resulted in the emergence and the consideration of possible expected subjective identity forms: professional soccer player? In the army? Sports coach? Sports physiotherapist? Dietitian? Eventually, 2 years after the first interview, Thomas underwent the tests for admission to the state police: a job that matches—according to Thomas’s private view (Guichard 2007, 2011) of this job—his desire of order, his interest in sports activities, and his caring of others.

### ***Dual Reflexivity as a Source of Stabilization of the Subjective Identity Forms System***

The dialogic ternary reflexivity is the very principle of an indefinite construction process of potential future prospects. It is indefinite, insofar as each interpretant a person construes about his/her past and present life (i.e., each new future perspective from which he/she relates to them) can give way, at its turn, to the elaboration of a new interpretant. This new interpretant corresponds to the construction of a new potential future prospect leading the person to reorganize his/her past and present life experiences from this new direction. This phenomenon was especially prominent in Thomas’s case (Piraud 2009) who, for about a year, was unable to stop this interpretative process and choose a certain future prospect which appeared to him as sufficiently desirable.

Nevertheless, it is easy to observe that most people make choices: they decide and stick to their decision; they strive to achieve a certain prospect. Multiple factors likely contribute to this stabilization and, notably, a concern to protect a current situation the individual does not consider as too bad in the life domains that matter to him/her. However, one of these factors seems to play a major stabilizing role. It is the dual reflexivity during which an individual constitutes him/herself as an object to him/herself, from the point of view of a certain ideal he/she wants to achieve (Foucault 1982a, b, 1983). During such a process, individuals define (and consecutively implement) some activities or behaviors in order to achieve a certain state of perfection in connection with the standards of this ideal. In adolescents or emerging adults

(but not only in them), this ideal generally corresponds to an expected SIF related to a certain character's image with whom they identify. This expected SIF may then play a decisive role in the organization of their subjective identity forms system.

This dual type of reflexivity seems to originate in the preverbal unification phenomenon of the human "I," that Jacques Lacan (1977) described with the concept of "mirror stage." This unification of oneself is based on an *expectation of being as this unified image of oneself* (which may be seen in a mirror). That is to say, to become as this eminently desirable image of him/herself that fascinates the individual who is then emerging as such. This mode of relating to oneself and to one's present and potential experiences involves identification with a certain internalized image and constitutes a certain crystallization of the self.

To illustrate this dual type of reflexivity, Dumora's (1990) observation may be mentioned: a junior high-school boy told her he "wanted to be like Zidane," the famous soccer player. This expectation allowed the teenager to see all his current activities from a certain perspective and give his various behaviors a certain direction and meaning. In the vocabulary used above, one can write that the image of Zidane this adolescent formed was an expected SIF that determined the organization of his SIF system: it was then structured from this major prospect perspective. Pouyaud (2008) described an analogous case: Igor, a vocational high-school student, organized his SIF system around a double central character: the amateur firefighter he was then, and the professional one he dreamt of becoming. All his experiences appeared to be "read" from this unique character's point of view that gave his past, present, and future life, a consistency and certain meaning.

Recall Thomas's case described above, in all probability, Thomas's mindset was the same before he realized the utmost sacrifices he would have to make in all his other life domains to fulfill his dream, for an unlikely result. Thomas's case also shows that it is not an easy thing to abandon such an identification. It is the reason why his first counselling interview—which was about an explicit question: how to tell my coach who sees me as his son that I want to give up cycling?—dealt implicitly with another issue, more fundamental to him: "what is it that I am telling myself?"

Expectations that play such a central role in individuals' lives generally do not die out when they are unfulfilled. Rather, they are taken back again and reinterpreted. They often continue to play a major role in individuals' interpretations of their current experiences and of some activities in which they are involved. This emerged, for example, in Piriou and Gadéa's (1999) observations. As already outlined, the participants were university students who studied sociology. Among them, those who obtained their Master's degrees used to saw themselves in the future in relation to the expected SIF of the "sociologist." However, there were (and still are) very few jobs available in this field. Therefore, almost all of them had to think about another career when they received their diploma (Master or PhD). Some of them then entered a career of youth worker or sociocultural activities coordinator. However, when questioned about the way they saw their jobs, these individuals often declared they performed it as "sociologists." They said, for example, they were more sensitive than other youth workers to the social conditions that could explain some behaviors in the populations of which they took care.

## The Function of Action in the Construction of Self

As a constructivist approach, the model *making oneself self*, considers individuals from a “creative” perspective. As shown by previous examples, the two kinds of reflexivity are described as two dynamic sources of identity construction as they are partially involved in conflicts, discrepancies, experienced and felt incompatibilities in the life-course, in daily interactions, or when individuals face others and the environment.

This model’s creative perspective refers to the individual’s ability to find a balance between the stabilizing kind of reflexivity (dual) and the interpretative one (ternary). This balance aims to resolve the experienced conflicts, via a continuous process of forming these sets of self-presentations, representations, and ways of acting and interacting that comprises the SIF. SIFs are thus the emerging aspects of the construction of self that are contemplated during counselling. In this sense the SIFs—organized as a system—are the outcomes, the structured supports for the self, as they were constructed at a certain time and in a particular context.

As we have seen, this construction relies mainly on language as a medium of reflexivity. Nevertheless, any SIF also encompasses certain forms of action (as scripts, for example), or some ways to act in a specific setting. Therefore interaction also needs to be comprehended from the perspective of the behaviors, feelings, emotions, and physical repercussions it calls for. If it is quite easy to discern the dynamic role of the two reflexivity processes, and the structural side of the SIF’s concept, it is less obvious to identify the more precise role of these last elements. Young et al. (2005) stated that the concept of action refers to different embedded levels spreading from internally directed behaviours to more socially constructed levels, such as projects and careers. Following this distinction, we’ll approach the issue of the role of action in the construction of self while differentiating the ways these diverse levels of actions may support the reflexivity processes.

SIFs can be seen as contextualized implementations of self that, via their changes, make a person’s identity story. This story, the life-course with its life or career themes, might be compared to an ongoing movie; that is, a projection of continuously revitalized SIFs directed by the reflexivity processes, with the help of the recording materials that are action and language. Capitalizing on the work of Vygotsky (1934/1986), who saw language as the primary psychological instrument of thought development, we can consider here action and language as the main instruments to record experience and construct a sense of self that allow self-realization.

A development of this movie metaphor permits the clarification of this point. Each of the elements detailed in the model *making oneself self* indeed appears as having a specific function in the production of such an “identity movie” (as construction of a “personal work to be shown”).

“Direction” is the creative process. As mentioned above, two types of reflexivity, involving identifications and interlocutory dialogues, produce a continuous recycling of the SIFs. As in sustainable development, this reflexivity process aims at resolving conflicts. People recycle their SIFs that have undergone the test of experience, which either stabilizes them or makes them change.

SIFs are the outcomes of this direction. They are the developed pictures, the succession of which displays what is shown about self. They are continuously put through the trials of experience, of which they are also the outcomes. They are eventually what remain of the confrontation between self and experience, as they are sifted by the reflexivity processes. They are the results of “trials,” in this term’s alternative meaning, that is, (1) a process of testing by use of experience in view of establishing a certain proof, (2) an examination of evidence and a process of deliberation in order to issue a judgment, realize an effort or attempt, and (3) a state of pain or anguish. The SIF system is thus the “best” possible combination of self as it stems from an actual confrontation of self with experience, directed (set up, created) by reflexivity. Identity, as it appears through the SIF system, is therefore only a transient outcome of this direction.

No “direction” of self would occur if there was no instrument for recording the experience and editing it. The continuous process of self projection relies on psychological tools for marking experience and categorizing it in order to give it a meaning. Action can be seen as the main recording device and language the main editing one.

### *Action and Language as Instruments of Self’s Direction*

From a counselling intervention perspective, it is important to grasp how actions and language, as instruments, permit identity outcomes to be connected with identity processes. Constructivist counsellors rely on these two instruments when they support clients direct their life-designing processes. Therefore it is appropriate to specify how language and action function as instruments of the self’s construction.

#### **Action**

The example of Thomas (reported above) permits an understanding of the role of action as an experience “recorder” (as does a movie camera). Involved in dual reflexivity processes that stabilized his system of subjective identity forms via a major identification with the figure of the Tour de France winner, he enacted daily a subjective identity form anchored in such identification, as many high-level athletes do. This means that he did not only consider his actions from this perspective, but also that he performed them as such. This allowed him to put up with the requirements and sufferings induced by training and helped him experience his body as the athlete one he expected to become. Thus he tried to strengthen this core SIF via action, and the sensations and emotions that stemmed from it, and keep alive this view of self. So, it is via sensations and emotions originating in action, that is, when the body braves the actual circumstances, that action plays its role of “video-recording” pictures that need to be edited.

Emotions are experience markers, in the sense that they cause an assessment of self: they put it through trials. In Thomas' case, actions allowed this core SIF to be put through trials according to the dual reflexivity's logic of achievement of the self. But, in Thomas' story, this core SIF progressively decayed. Again, action played a major role in this process. On the occasion of an injury or an illness or on the occasion of poor performances, the feeling to enact the "Tour de France" winner crumbled. The core SIF lost its efficacy when action no longer brought about the physical abilities required for a steady identification. Subsequently, emotions and sensations experienced in action did not strengthen the SIF, but put it into doubt and even challenged it. Once again emotions and sensations are markers of self that need to be edited, but this time according to the ternary reflexivity's logic of interpretation of the self.

Different types of actions and feelings should probably be differentiated. The joy felt when mounting the podium, the feeling of pride when one brandishes high in the air a cup with one's chest stuck out, the sensation of being worn out after intensive training, or the sharing of a meal with one's team mates to get over a defeat probably do not have the same impact on the construction of self, in an expected SIF of a Tour de France winner, as the felt joy when seeing a play or the felt fatigue after a run to catch a bus.

The potential link between an action and a SIF appears to be the product of the specific interaction between individual and context. It is linked with an action: a certain action which stirs the individual to a greater or lesser degree. But it also depends on the individual's capacity to consider this action from a perspective of self construction.

Levels of action, as differentiated by Young et al. (2005), certainly enrich the understanding of this identity dynamic. These levels of action (individual action, joint action, project, career, described by the internal processes, the social meaning and manifest action, and guided by action elements, functions, and goals) may be understood as fostering either a reinforcement or a re-interpretation of self, according to contexts and the current goals of these actions.

As already suggested, individuals are not committed to a process of self-construction by any experienced action. In our metaphor, only the marked actions (the recorded ones), which are then edited by language when it directs the production of self, are involved in an active way in the construction of SIFs.

Actions in which individuals become involved are the motive and goals that are related to some characteristics of the self that makes sense in a given context. Thus, Brunstein (1993) asserted that individuals seemed to commit themselves more to what he called their "personal goals" (as cited in Downie et al. 2006).

If the nature of the goal can play a role in an individual's involvement in his construction of self, the fact that SIF are organized into a system suggests that pondering the different personal goals could also imply the two types of reflexivity. For example, Boudrenghien et al. (2011) have investigated the involvement of college students in their studies. Referring to Carver and Scheier (1998), they differentiate the capacity to become involved in a goal according to its levels of abstraction and integration. According to the goal's level of abstraction, the authors differentiate

identity goals (“be goals”) that aim at self-achievement as a person, from action and action goals (“do goals”) that aim simply to achieve a certain type of action. The “be” and “do” goals are integrated and form a hierarchical system of goals. “Do goals” are at the lowest level of this hierarchy. They are sub-goals that are involved in the implementation of “be goals,” which are at this hierarchy’s highest level. The links between goals and sub-goals permit the description of each goal’s level of integration. The more the attainment of a goal is perceived to be dependant on the joint attainment of many other goals, the higher is its level of integration. The higher a goal is integrated, the more individuals tend to perceive it as important and become involved in its achievement. “Do goals,” which may be compared to the individual action level in Young’s model (Young et al. 2005), serve as supports for the achievement of “be goals,” which may be compared to the levels of joint actions, project, and career, as soon as they are integrated; that is, in Young’s model, as soon as individual and joint actions become components of projects and careers.

The processes involved in the integration of the different levels of action into this hierarchical system also need to be understood. If, as we asserted, the levels of action are the media of the self’s construction, then the two previously described reflexivity processes may be seen as aiming to organize the goals of action into a hierarchy. As language permits to take back again action in a creative way, it allows certain hierarchical links between sub-goals and goals are construed. For example, during a counselling interview, or a discussion with parents, one adolescent will explain his/her daily actions, associated emotions and goals. Interacting with the counsellor or parents leads him/her to create a hierarchy between those actions (goals and emotions). For example he/she can consider that “playing soccer with friends” is fundamental for his/her self-construction, but not “playing piano”. One action can thus support be-goals, joint-action and project, while the other just still remains a way to act.

### **Action Markers (Emotion, Feeling, Reason)**

Individual behaviours, interactions with others, and conversation are actions which are combined in individuals’ minds with emotional and sensory states, and with cognitions. From our perspective, these are the action markers from which stem goals, both do-goals and be-goals, that are integrated in SIF via the reflexivity processes. Emotion and feelings are very close. They are the primary markers of sensory affects: these may be considered to be individuals’ basic ways of relating to their personal experiences. Following Damasio (1999), we may consider emotions and feelings as differentiating themselves only with regard to the “level of abstraction” of the mode of relating to self they imply. Emotions and feelings are suggested to be two different translations of a same state, the first one being a body translation and the second one a mental translation.

Emotion, feeling, and consciousness (reason) are then different translations of what could be named “affects,” seen as results of agency, as results of one’s own actions grasped either in an unaware body mode, in an immediate mental way, or

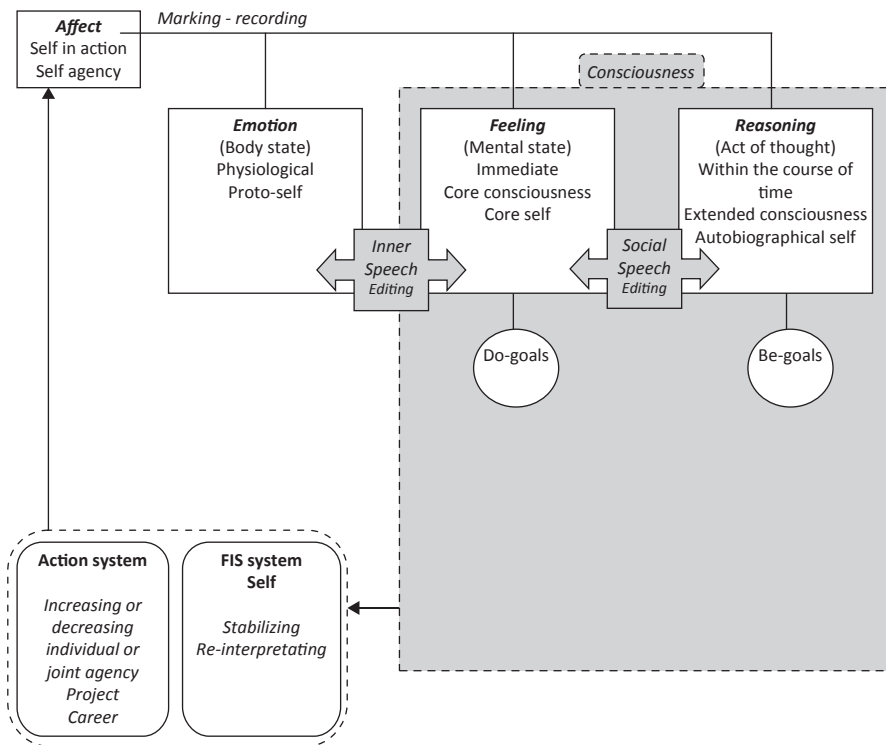


Fig. 6.1 Self-construction model

again in a rational consciousness. Following Damasio (1999), we therefore distinguish proto-self (internal body maps), core consciousness (immediate non-verbal neuronal maps), and extended consciousness (memorized neuronal maps) as being neurological activations of this acting self (See Fig. 6.1).

Conceiving consciousness within the action system leads to specifying the role played by each of these levels of consciousness in the formation of specific action goals. Indeed, if the states of consciousness are expressions of affect, then they can be markers: “do goals” or “be goals” needing to be integrated. Anger, joy, sadness, but also self-efficacy beliefs, self-esteem, interests or values, and so forth are such markers. They correspond to a certain translation or interpretation of affects within different levels of consciousness, from proto-self to extended consciousness. Thus, these different markers regulate action both internally and socially, through socially and contextually constructed goals. Young et al. (1997) stressed this point when they assigned the three following functions to emotions in action regulation: actions’ self-regulations, strategies to lead joint actions, and influence in the process of giving actions a meaning.

From a dynamic standpoint, this translation or interpretation of emotion within the language of feeling is the first step towards consciousness, first to the core



consciousness and then to the extended one. It gives access to behaviors and their meanings, to objects, to others, to time, and to the construction of personal goals. In order to develop this awareness “of something” must also be put to test; that is, it must be translated into the language of emotions via a return to concrete action. Then, it makes a return journey so as to be re-transformed into affects that can participate in an increased agency. Thus, in such a circular system, emotion, as body state, comes always first but is continuously recycled within the language of feeling and consciousness.

Therefore it is by language that the markers of action are constructed, and edited in order to produce some forms about self that integrate goals which are organized in a hierarchical system of connections.

### *Language as Instrument of Consciousness*

A certain level of language, conceived as instrument of thought, may be associated with each level of consciousness that was previously described. The translation of affects from one level to another—as the return activity to put to test the markers of action—require tools or instruments of translation and of implementation by action. Language appears to be the main instrument at work in the two types of reflexivity which contributes to editing the identity movie. The distinction made by Vygotsky (1934/1986) between social and inner languages permits one to associate these two tools with the two levels of consciousness previously described.

This distinction seems relevant to understand the dynamics of the SIF modeling through action. Language is considered by Vygotsky (1986) to be a psychological tool insofar as it permits acting, and consequently transforming oneself. Language mainly has a regulatory function of self; it is a means of behavioral self-regulation. If social language is constructed by individuals as imported from the external, then inner speech is private; according to Vygotsky (1986) it is deconstructed to the point of being a “speech almost without words” (p. 244) because “thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them” (p. 218). Social and inner languages may then be considered as tools to “direct” self: the latter playing its part at the level of core consciousness and the former at the level of extended consciousness. Social language (the one among the two languages that individuals are the more aware of) is a tool used to translate—to edit—feelings into SIF via an integration of action goals into personal goals. This corresponds to the transition from the core-self to autobiographic one, in Damasio’s (1999) terms.

Respectively, inner speech is the main tool of emotion editing. On the one hand, it translates emotions into feelings by forming action goals. On the other hand, it puts the SIFs through trials of action, which prompt emotions. Thus inner speech appears more specifically to be a mediator between body and consciousness. It is indeed through inner speech that the body makes sense whilst a sense of self can be enacted bodily.

Thus, language seems to be at the very heart of the processes of self's construction, as it appears as a media either of reflexivity or of action (according to its level of interiority). Therefore, it seems now important to construct interventions—for “life designing” counsellors—that activate this double reflexivity which combines reflexivity and action.

## **Reflexivity and Action in Career and Life Designing Counselling**

During counselling interviews, the dual and ternary forms of reflexivity appear as the major development factors of clients' views of their situations and their problems. In fact, according to the features of their situation, to their reflection progresses, and to the counselling interview phases, clients tend to favor either one form of reflexivity or the other. This finding emerged, notably, from the descriptions of career counselling interviews by Bangali (2011).

Bangali (2011) reported the client-counsellor interactions during interviews with two newly graduated doctors. Both of them were looking for a job and were in quite a difficult situation. Indeed, when they wrote their thesis, as most French doctoral students do, they pictured their future career within the expected SIF of a researcher in their specialty, working at university or at a state research body. However, job opportunities in these domains are extremely scarce and both of them had to remodel their anticipations and think about a career in a private company. During counselling, these two doctors completed the same exercise: they were asked to give all requested instructions to a double who would represent them the following day in a career interview, in such a way the recruiter wouldn't notice the substitution. Their statements uttered on that exercise occasion were analyzed. This analysis showed that each of them favored different enunciation modes which can be referred to either form of reflexivity.

Mr. G was 29 years old, held a neuroscience doctorate and had completed two post-doc years in the United States. During the ‘instruction to a double’ exercise, giving more importance to the dual reflexivity, he relied on the vocational identification he forged when he was working on his thesis: the expected SIF of becoming a “researcher in neurosciences.” In doing the exercise, Mr. G. favored speech acts that displayed a critical distance and the setting up of precise future prospects. He developed dialogic processes that aimed to see his career expectation from another perspective: that of potential recruiter demands in a possible company, a recruiter and a company quite well delineated (at least in Mr. G's mind). The ternary reflexivity was activated by Mr. G only to specify his vocational expected SIF and to find the adequate attributes to transform it into an actual SIF: a SIF that could be recognized—validated—by a recruiter (in particular by one of the Sanofi laboratories where he pictured himself at work). He modified his SIF's anchoring point from the academic laboratory where he prepared his doctorate, to that of a pharmaceutical company where a job might be offered. Using the terms forged by Ginzberg et al. (1951), one can say that Mr. G used the ternary form of reflexivity to specify and realize his vocational expectation.

Ms. L was 33 years old, held a doctorate in political sciences, a postgraduate certificate in communication, and a master degree in philosophy. During the exercise, she gave more importance to the ternary reflexivity. Her goal was to sketch out and possibly specify, a vocational SIF with which she could identify. This appeared in her speech acts via a frequent use of linguistics markers—as questions and notices—that expressed an influence process on herself. Fundamentally, Ms. L wondered about herself and her different past experiences in order to outline a certain future prospect that would make them meaningful. She used the dual reflection processes only as auxiliaries of the ternary ones. This became evident in her search for keys elements in her life she could organize in view of certain future prospects (mainly, but not only, a career one) she could narrate to make a coherent life story. She achieved it eventually when she elicited a new vocational expected SIF—head of communications in the field of bioethics—that allowed her to aggregate her life from this future prospect. But to do so, she had to wonder about what was more important to her in her life. Using the language of Ginzberg et al. (1951), one can say that her speech and thought acts showed an exploration process of her life in order to crystallize it according to a certain future prospect that could unify it.

Thus, the two forms of reflexivity appeared to have been activated during these counselling interviews to help the client, either to sketch (as in the case of Ms. L), or to specify and implement (as in the case of M. G) some future plans. Certainly, such reflexivity was not only a purely abstract form of reasoning: the emotions that occur during counselling interactions play an indisputable part in these developments.

Nevertheless, the real issue in counselling intervention goes beyond the interaction situation. Efficient counselling requires action. It aims to involve the clients in a process of constructing their “real” lives: it is by their daily actions that they make their anticipated SIF become current ones or not. As previously explained, the reflexivity processes activated during a counselling interview leads to a reappraisal of the goals and sub-goals hierarchy, which is preliminary to the action. In turn, the latter allows the reinforcement, modification, and sometimes challenge, of a SIF and, at times, the current organization of the SIF system.

Frequently, one stresses the importance of the implementation—via action—of outcomes of counselling interventions (Savickas 2011): such an implementation being sometimes seen as the ultimate phase of the counselling process. However, some specific modes of supporting the construction of the self which take into account the two previously distinguished levels should be developed. Using a circular approach, such counselling approaches would go forward to cognitive developments via the social language of interactions and back to the feelings and emotions linked with the inner language and the action.

The association “Sport and Job” (*Sport—Emploi*, <http://www.sport-emploi-concept.com/>) offers a career intervention that may connect these two levels. The goal is to help school dropouts, very distant from the job market, either to begin some vocational training or in their transition to employment. Sport training is used to achieve that purpose. Through this intervention, it is expected that these young people construct certain new SIFs that would allow them to reach either goal. The intervention alternates sport training and debriefing sessions. The training sessions

permit to put through trials the conclusions and advices formulated during the debriefing ones. The training sessions are also used by the “sport coach and counsellor” to observe behaviors, attitudes, and interactions. These observations are discussed and interpreted during the debriefing sessions in the course of which players and coach/counsellor define together some other ways to be and act on the sports ground. Trainees then formulate actions and joint goals, which they must implement when they train. Thus, the involved activity is always a sports one. However, through this activity, reflecting on the activity, its transformation and the implementation of the transformed activity, a whole process of reflection on oneself in that situation begins: a consideration of one’s ways to be, act, interact, etc., in connection with the experience of some emotions. Thus, the back and forth guided moves between the language interactions—mainly at time of the debriefing sessions—and the inner language—mainly at time of sport training—appears to be the principle that underlies the change of SIF, which then occurs progressively.

Such an intervention seems well-suited to the population it is intended for—mainly young men. Similar interventions need to be developed for people who differ as regards their age, gender, interests, etc. These would provide counsellors with a possibility to renew their practice and concentrate on some important aspects of counselling interventions (such as actions, feelings, emotions, and inner language) that, until now, are often left behind the scene. The development of interventions that refer to such theoretical considerations would allow counsellors to offer more appropriate supports to their clients who badly need to find tangible life bearings as they are now “living in an age of uncertainty”, to quote Bauman’s title (2007).

## Conclusion

All the observations reported in this chapter converge: what was called “career counselling” (and previously vocational guidance) has been transformed into something quite different in relation with the emergence of liquid modernity. In liquid societies, individuals are indeed considered as fully responsible for the direction they give their careers and lives. To do so, they need to rely on their own reflexivity: they have to think about all their life experiences and to interpret them. Life and career interventions are then seen as aiming to support people in this endeavour.

As presented, reflexivity and action seem to be two useful concepts in order to enhance today’s counselling practices. Two major kinds of interventions may be distinguished. The first one aims to help clients create or develop specific ways to relate to themselves and their experiences for the purpose of constructing a vocational subjective identity form that matches the current social norms of employability. These interventions, in guiding reflexivity on societal norms, may be named “guidance” or “advising interventions”.

The purpose of the second type of interventions—which may be named counselling for life designing—is more fundamental: it is to assist people in developing the reflexivity they need to design their lives. During such interventions, clients think

about their lives in order to define (and redefine at each period of their lives) the major expectations (expected subjective identity forms) that give their lives meanings. The goal is then to help clients define their own norms. It is to assist each of them in finding the life bearings that will play the holding role the relatively steady social and ideological frameworks and routines used to provide individuals with in solid societies.

Reflexivity is involved in both kinds of interventions. But it is mainly in counselling for life designing that the different processes of reflexivity outlined above are fully mobilized. Indeed, during guidance interventions, clients relate to their various experiences from the perspective of defined goals. For example, they ask themselves which kind of competencies they have developed on the occasion of their various activities and interactions in relation to some working activities which would require such competencies. Thus, the relevant actions for counselling are chosen for their career efficacy (like career developmental tasks). Differently, during counselling interventions, clients wonder about their major life goals. Therefore, they need to rely on their ternary form of reflexivity to construct the interpretants that give meaning to what appears to them then, as their major life experiences (as Thomas did during the various counselling sessions reported above). But they need also to determine which ones among these interpretants are more meaningful to them. This implies they combine them with the emotions and feelings either they have already experienced on the occasion of their previous actions and interactions or as they will experience them on the occasion of further actions or dialogues, when they put these interpretants through trials. Then, the relevant actions for counselling are constructed through the reflexivity processes.

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## Chapter 7

# Career and Identity Construction in Action: A Relational View

Hanoch Flum

Psychology has been criticized for the prevailing construction, and often-exclusive focus, on human development in terms of self-contained, separate, and bounded, individuals. To be sure, to this day contemporary psychology relies “on construals of human beings as isolated, self-sufficient individuals who develop essentially in a vacuum” (Stetsenko 2013, p. 181). Through this conceptualization a divide is created between the self and the social/cultural. Assumptions about the self, when viewed through the lens of an individualistic ontology, “presuppose that the boundaries of the person are roughly at the surface of the skin” (Christopher and Bickhard 2007, p. 262). A split between the internal and the external is a reflection of dualistic and individualistic bias of Western culture and much of mainstream psychology (e.g., Christopher and Bickhard 2007). This is still largely the case in much of vocational psychology and career development conceptualizations, although the sound of drums of change echo the growing awareness of a more interactive role of context and culture, of social construction processes, of the role of language and social discourse, interpersonal interaction and relational experiences that are at the core of it all.

The apparent tension between what is often regarded as two fundamental modalities (for instance, agency and communion Bakan 1966), and their developmental roles are at the heart of the discussion in this chapter. Indeed, the drums sounding change are engendered and intensified, at least in part, following cultural-historical flow from earlier modernity to later modernity in Western societies. Conceptual tension and confusion, along with the recognition of the need for more complex and dynamic construction of reality, accompany the change in the social sciences discourse in general, and in psychology and career development specifically.

In order to introduce the ecology in which the current discussion is situated, two conceptual propositions will be followed, propositions that will serve to frame the discussion in socio-historical context. These propositions will also serve as a springboard for highlighting principles of the conceptual ground. Interestingly, and

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somewhat paradoxically, the first reference is proposed by a prominent psychologist, Jerome Bruner, who is responsible for more than one revolution in psychology and whose emphasis is on human psychology as a product of communal context. His claim precedes an analysis of cultural transformation made by the distinguished social scientists, Beck, Bauman, and Giddens, who highlight processes of individualization.

In his book, *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner (1990) proposes that *meaning* is the central concept in human psychology and implies that the “processes and transactions involved in the construction of meanings” (p. 33) are central to human life and mind. Human experiences and actions are shaped by the person’s intentional states, which in turn are formed in the context of participation in symbolic systems of culture. Culture provides the means to overcome biological limits and affords “meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system” (p. 34). Inherent in Bruner’s proposition is the understanding of the fundamental role of communal context in human life and development, with its patterns of mutual dependency, as they are developed through “language and discourse modes, logical and narrative explication” (p. 34). As indicated, Bruner’s contention serves as a foundation to the main argument in the following discussion and the basic conception embedded in it is explicated from different perspectives as the discussion unfolds.

Cultures are varied with specific nuances and dynamics. In North America, individualism is traditionally defined as a cultural emphasis and a fundamental ethos (Bellah et al. 1985). European social scientists underscore the process of individualization. Bellah et al. (1985) indicate that work is the domain of “utilitarian individualism” (p. 83). Beck (1992) refers to the sphere of work as an exemplary arena where the process of structural change leads to individualization, and later (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) claims that the labor market is the ‘motor’ of individualization (p. 31). Changes in structural processes in both society (e.g., the decline of social class) and in the work organization in the modern era affect individualization in this latter sphere. Ulrich Beck (1992) explains in his book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* that past traditions which used to keep social structures relatively stable and anchored individuals’ identities, are replaced by de-structuring processes and de-traditionalization that in turn lead to processes of individualization. Lately, it is observed, individualization is gradually getting institutionalized in Western societies and takes the place of collectivization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Bauman (2000) credits Beck with opening a new chapter in the way the process of individualization is comprehended. In his emphasis on Western societies’ transformation from a “solid” to “liquid” phase of modernity, he generally regards “individualization” and “modernity” as being synonymous in the sense that they represent the same social condition. Bauman adds “individualization consists of transforming human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance.” (p. 31).

A marker of late-modern life is growing uncertainty and the threat to personal meaningfulness (cf. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991). Uncertainty

is a powerful individualizing force, according to Bauman's (2000) observation, and the process of individualization is an ongoing active process. Bauman further warns that contemporary social forms melt faster than new ones can solidify, and efforts to develop long-term strategy and "life-projects" are bound to fail in this context. Weakening social structures do not provide a frame stable enough to hold long-term planning, and individual lives are more and more likely to consist of a series of short-term projects and episodes rather than "consistent and cohesive sequences" (Bauman 2005, p. 304). This kind of observation puts the notion of career in a new context and challenges the conceptualization of career development along with the goals of career counseling and intervention.

However, the same socio-cultural processes that engender individualization, also promote awareness of the power of social construction and enhance the need for relationships. With de-traditionalization and the apparent gradual loss of clearly defined and institutionalized social bases that used to be taken for granted, individualization leaves the person with questions about the self in relation to (more or less) subtle social structures. Changes in life routines that are held by norms and institutionalization carry the potential to raise questions in reference to the experience of the self as well as the meaning of social processes. When people experience "loss of traditional security with respect to practical knowledge, faith, and guiding norms" (Beck 1992, p. 128) as byproducts of change in prescribed social forms and traditional contexts, they experience the duality of a sense of being "liberated" along with the fundamental motivation to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and look for sources of security and reaffirmation. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) state, "The reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this, however, the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual's interaction with others" (p. 137). Indeed, when routines fold and uncertainty creeps in, it is not only individualization that is enhanced; uncertainty also carries the potential to augment the need for affiliation and sensitivity to relatedness. In line with this observation is the conclusion that, as a reaction to strong emphasis on individualism in American culture, there are indications of "a popular desire for more connection, more intimacy, more community bonds" (Christopher and Bickhard 2007, p. 285).

The human need to affiliate is a basic one. Humans cannot develop in total isolation. The cornerstone and primary experience of their development is bonding and relating with others (Josselson 1992). Selfhood is developed in the intersection of the individual in relation to others, and as George Herbert Mead (1934) articulated, the *self* is essentially a *social structure* which arises and is constituted within social experience. Hence, the human disposition leads to "a socially 'co-constructed' nature of self-knowledge" (Rochat 2009, p. 35). From very early in life the tension between the need to maintain proximity and explore, between being with and autonomous action, resonates, as has been clearly theorized by Erikson (1968), Winnicott (1965), and Bowlby (1988). In Erikson's (1968) psychosocial perspective, the interplay between the social and the individual plays the central role in the unfolding life of humans, with a changing focus on the meaning of the actual representation of the social context along life and the developmental consequences.

## Career

“Career” emerged as a product of the modern era following the industrial revolution (Savickas 2000), and is associated with bureaucratic organizations and capitalist culture (Collin 2000; Savickas 1995) and mirrors the process of individualization. Career, as a concept, represents an emphasis on the self-contained individual with limited attention to a more complicated view of the individual in context (Blustein 2001; Flum 2001a; Schultheiss 2007). Although career can be applied to different domains, it usually refers to an emphasis on work positions occupied by a person, a sequence of occupations, along the person’s work life (cf. Savickas 2001). This common meaning is shared by both academic literature and lay discourse (Young and Collin 2000). Career also represents an educational and work-related progression trajectory, or a succession of educational qualifications and work roles. No wonder that career development and counseling had been found to be too narrow in their approach, being disconnected from other domains of life, largely ignoring major life experiences and informative personal-developmental knowledge (see, for instance, Richardson 2012b; Young and Domene 2012).

However, career (along with its derivatives, notably ‘career development’ and ‘career counseling’) and the variety of meanings it conveys has been challenged from an array of perspectives (see, for instance, Blustein 2006; Collin and Young 2000; Hall et al. 1996). It has been criticized for being a representation of the ethos of self-centered individualism (Richardson 1993), for not being inclusive (Blustein 2001), and for being based on a notion of consistency or solid continuity that does not correspond to the rapidly changing late-modernity life in general and in relation to the world of work in particular (e.g. Hall 2002; Hall et al. 1996).

The career conceptual lens leads to an artificial separation of career development and personal development, and to a practice that is likely to overlook relational and emotional aspects of the individual’s life (Richardson 2012a, b; Young and Domene 2012). Throughout the years, there have been scholars who advocated a broader view, and an expansion of career’s definition (e.g. Cochran 1991; Smelser 1980). In Super’s (1980) ‘life span, life space’ model, attention is paid to the various life roles played by the individual, and the model raises questions about the relationships among them. However, the conceptual landscape of career development and counseling implications has only recently started to reflect the change. Inevitably, the reality of interconnectedness of life domains (e.g. Richardson 2012b) and the need to assume multiple work-related transitions throughout life and translate them to a lifelong learning process (e.g. Flum and Blustein 2000; Rifkin 1995; Savickas 1995) are more widely recognized (Savickas et al. 2009). Attempts to conceptualize career in broader terms and expand the conceptual landscape of our understanding of work and relationships, relied on a social constructionist approach (Blustein et al. 2004; Dyer et al. 2010; Richardson et al. 2009; Richardson 2012a, b; Young and Collin 2004). A most elaborated showcase of the study of career development and career counseling at the transition from adolescence to adulthood follows Young and colleagues’ contextual action theory (e.g. 2008, 2011a, b). Findings of a series

of studies that follow the principles of the theory and fitting modes of inquiry (for a review of methods see Young et al. 2005) are instrumental in advancing conceptual understanding.

## **Contextualized Action: Intertwined Projects**

Contextual Action Theory and the research it engendered postulate a view of career as being grounded in a moderate social constructionist approach (e.g. Dyer et al. 2010) and hence as being relationally-based. In their contextualist explanation of careers, Young and his colleagues (e.g. 2001, 2004, 2006, 2011, 2012) propose the construct of ‘goal-directed human action’ as a reflection of the way people perceive their own and others’ behavior. Being a nucleus construct, it is extended to include broader social meaning and longer time connotations through (a) joint action, (b) project, and (c) career. Each one of these constructs is defined as a super-ordinate construct in ascending manner. Hence, Young et al. maintain that career is socially constructed through goal-directed joint actions and projects. An early focus was on adolescents and their peers (Young et al. 1999); however, more recently they studied joint actions and projects in the family, notably through the parent-adolescent relationship. Their research has been carried out systematically and enriches our understanding of the intricate and complex processes by which these constructions occur. Young and his colleagues studied vocational joint projects in varied family related contexts including in the context of parents and young adolescents (Young et al. 2001), in families who face a variety of challenges (Young et al. 2006), and in families with parents and older adolescents (Young et al. 2008). They also examined these types of projects in the context of romantic partners (Domene and Young 2008), and in counseling (Dyer et al. 2010). In summing up the implications for practice, Dyer et al. (2010) conclude that the relationship project in career counseling not only contains, but also reflects, other projects such as identity and vocational projects.

In additional conclusions drawn from their studies, Young and colleagues point out that “vocation is not only constructed in relationships, but that the vocational project and the relational project are intertwined” (Young and Domene 2012, p. 22). Following an analysis of counseling sessions focusing on the transition to adulthood with 19–21 year old volunteers, Young et al. (2011) ask about the goal-directed actions and projects that are jointly constructed by counselors and clients. Three broad projects are identified: education/occupation, identity, and relationships. These are three main projects that young clients are engaged in, in their life outside counseling. A primary finding indicates that the relationship and identity goal-directed projects are intertwined within and outside counseling. Indeed, earlier in a more general review of the meaning of career, Young and Collin (2000) observed that the tension that “is encapsulated in career is being at the heart of the modern dilemma of identity” (p. 8).

These conclusions are important for the understanding of the interconnection among projects, and indeed the complex dynamics that are revealed in these studies. They support Blustein et al.'s (2004) proposal that a social constructionist perspective can facilitate the complex weaving together of relational and working themes to enhance understanding of the role of family systems in the work and relationships space. At the same time, the action experienced in these projects (as exposed in research and counseling) may reveal aspects of the larger system and lead to awareness that could become transformative (Schultheiss 2007; Schultheiss et al. 2007). Indeed, both the relational experience in its micro meaning of interaction and communication, and as a link with the larger system, the communal discourse and culture, are likely to contribute to the person's identity construction.

## Identity

Although Young et al. (e.g. 1999, 2001, 2008) define career as being relationally based, and this definition is not without theoretical and empirical merit, it is still a diversion from the cultural, colloquial, and professional discourse (cf. Collin 2000). In our socially constructed discourse, "career" is loaded with individualization and the relational aspect remains largely obscured. Both career and identity are overburdened constructs. However, identity became a key and indispensable concept in the social sciences (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) that captures a variety of nuanced meanings, and yet serves discourses across disciplines. In the context of the current article, identity offers the common ground between Bruner's emphasis on meaning and the communal culture and the continental sociologists' (Beck, Bauman, and Giddens) emphasis on the process of individualization following socio-historical change and the loss of traditional institutions as underwriters of people's identity. Identity is a concept that holds the duality of communion and agency. "Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society", claim Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 174) in their seminal work on *The Social Construction of Reality*. Similarly, identity formation is the key "process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" in Erikson's (1968, p. 22, *italics in origin*) psychosocial perspective. In Erikson's view, identity encompasses individual and social meaning and is considered in terms of the interplay between individual and society.

Despite Erikson's effort to underscore the 'hard to grasp' psycho-social complexity of the notion of identity, the prevailing tendency in psychology is to give primacy to the individual and to the individualization process in the development of identity (as has been exemplified by neo-Eriksonians, Marcia (1966), and Waterman (1988)). This tendency is criticized by scholars from different perspectives, those who couple sociological and psychological literature (e.g. Côté and Levine 1988, 2002) and scholars who have pointed to relational processes as being a key to identity formation (e.g. Josselson 1987; Kroger 1996). Conceptually, identity captures the mutual constitution of the individual and context. The lived experi-

ence of identity, identity as being experienced by the individual, reflects a sense of being part of with an individuated face. Identity is constantly being co-constructed and serves as a pivot between the social and the individual. Its major function is an integrative one, because it concurrently allows some distinction between the internal and the external, between the individual and the communal, while avoiding dichotomy and split. There is no inherent conflict or divergence between the individual and the collective meanings of identity (cf. Wenger 1998).

Identity is an ongoing process; it is “always changing and developing” (Erikson 1968, p. 23), “never... static or unchangeable” (p. 24), and yet also marked by “the two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one’s existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity.” (p. 50). At the same time it also includes, on a different level, “the *style of one’s individuality*, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one’s *meaning for significant others* in the immediate community” (Erikson 1968, p. 50, emphasis in the original). Erikson exemplifies the process of identity formation for fathoming the complexity of identity:

In psychological terms, the process of identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is... for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, ‘identity–consciousness.’ (pp. 22–23)

Giddens (1991) explains his concept of *self-identity*: It “is not something that is just given...but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (p. 52).

The aforementioned relative void of institutionalized traditions, that served to underwrite identity, is partially filled by discourses, which are mediated by direct interaction with others as well as through other means (e.g. education, media, and variety of systems of communication). Discursive processes are moving further to the foreground; with the ascending need for recognition through discourse and dialogue as people become more and more aware of them (Gee 2000). People’s sense of purpose, their tasks, functions, and understandings emerge in the context of systems of relations or social communities where they have meaning. Hence, identity, knowing, and social membership are linked and entail each other (Lave and Wenger 1991).

In a study of indicators of internal processes following a group discussion with advanced university students, Richardson et al. (2009) made a distinction between internal processes that reflect intentional states regarding future lives in relation to contexts of work and relationships, and expressions of new or revised thoughts and feelings of the students about themselves; that is, identity process. Following their findings they raise a question about the ways in which intentional processes and identity processes are mutually constitutive and lead to the construction and reconstruction of a life course.

Intentional states shape the person's action (Bruner 1990) and they are constructed in a relational and cultural context. Similarly, Erikson (1968) regards the development of a sense of ambition and purpose as they are related to biologically based locomotion, to language and relationships, and to imagination. Intentional states, purpose, and goals embody motivation, future orientation, and direction. They are all manifestations of identity and underscore its processual facet, its construction and reconstruction. Intentions, sense of purpose, and goals are experienced as expressions of identity which link the person with doing; they direct action and hence are likely to promote a sense of agency (Richardson 2004). They signify the translation of identity into practice, a trans-action since practice becomes a lived experience of negotiated meaning and reifies identity (Wenger 1998).

Radical social constructionists would refer to the subjective intentional states, sense of purpose, and personal agency as an illusion (for more detailed discussion see Richardson 2004). However, both Bruner's and Erikson's perspectives engender a more complicated position, as do other scholars from different perspectives, and offer a complementary approach to human nature.

## **Identity: Perspectives on Communal Culture and Agency in Action**

Erikson (1968) refers to the social-personal interplay in the construction of identity as being "hard to grasp" (p. 22). Indeed, the question of relationship between the individual and culture has been an evasive one in psychology, because of the pervasive dualism that permeated psychology and the social sciences in general (Christopher and Bickhard 2007). Ann Swidler (1986), building to an extent on Geertz (1973), confronts the issue of "culture in action" from a sociological-anthropological perspective. Swidler defines culture as "the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning" (p. 273). Modes of behavior and outlook are shared in the community through symbolic forms including language, stories, beliefs, formal and informal ritual practices, ceremonies, and art forms. Culture does not determine the end action or a single action directly, but exerts influence through 'strategies of action'. Strategy is not a conscious plan formulated to attain a goal; it is a "general way of organizing action" (Swidler 1986, p. 277). Hence, 'strategies of action' rely on, in Swidler's examples, the relational web (family and friends) and experience at work.

Culture is not a unified system and consists of varied action guides. Actors select differing pieces from a repertoire offered by culture's tool kit, and construct chains of action. Hence, people do not start from scratch but from pre-fabricated material. And culture impacts the shape and the organization of the links of action, although not determining the end action. As indicated, culture provides a tool kit of resources or materials from which actors (individuals or groups) construct strategies of action, and these selected cultural elements are invested in meanings in certain concrete life circumstances. This distinctive cultural explanation is appropriate, according



to Swidler (1986), at a time of established and settled cultures. However, Swidler contributes a reference to a period of social transformation as well.

While at a settled period an emphasis is on the creation of continuities in strategies of action with the refinement of skills, habits, and modes of experience, an unsettled model underscores the contest of cultures based on competing ideologies rather than on tradition or shared common sense. In this latter model, argues Swidler (1986), explicit ideologies are linked with action and new modes of action develop within structural constraints and historical circumstances. Hence, concrete situations determine the endurance of cultural models.

Swidler's (1986) perspective depicts culture as 'symbolic vehicles of meaning'; vehicles of meanings that are communally shared. However, by using the cultural 'tool kit resources, strategies of action are constructed and can be viewed as being translated to intentional states and definition of purpose by the person. In this process particular meanings are invested in concrete life circumstances. It can be extrapolated that identity is constructed through combined cultural and agentic processes, i.e. applying cultural resources configured by the *style of one's individuality* (as Erikson articulated) in a form meaningful to one's community.

Shweder (1990) points out the need to develop a framework in psychology with a focus on the relationship between "intentional persons" ("reality-constituting psyches") and "intentional worlds" ("culturally constituted realities") (p. 27). Christopher and Bickhard (2007) address Shweder's call in their interactivist metatheory for cultural psychology. Interactivism is a process model, consistent with social practice and interpretive perspective—hermeneutic, dialogical, and narrative—insights, but situates them within a developmental ontology. This comprehensive metatheory tackles dualism and the prevalent tendency to reify culture and person and refer to them as two separate things in psychology. It explores, among other questions, the central question: "What is the ontology of culture and how does it relate to the self, identity and agency?" (Christopher and Bickhard 2007, p. 261).

In accord with Shweder et al. (1998), this ontology advances the propositions that "the self is (a) constituted in interaction with others; (b) collectively constructed through sociocultural participation; and (c) a product of history" (Christopher and Bickhard 2007, p. 264). Using a developmental ontology lens, Christopher and Bickhard (2007) introduce the concept of 'knowing levels,' which refer to knowledge and representation, to agency and the self, to goals, values, and culture.

According to interactivism, culture cannot be reified. Cultural assumptions, values, and meanings are implicit in engagement in social practices, in forms of agency. Through interactive experiences and memories of patterns of functioning, representations become another aspect of a culturally situated, engaged, and embodied agency. Culture and agency are inherently intertwined and distributed across levels of knowing.

A certain type of knowledge, which is implicit at one level of knowing, can become (at least partially) explicit in higher level. At the first level of knowing, the self is implicit. The child is non-reflective, and cannot differentiate between her or his being and a sense of self. In the second knowing level a sense of self is developing, along with an implicit sense of self-representation. At the third knowing level,

this implicit self-representation emerges explicitly and can become consciously known; thus self-reflexiveness is engendered. Christopher and Bickhard (2007) depict self-reflexiveness as a process "...from which to compare his or her self to a system of alternatives, judge it against values, and construct it in accordance with those judgments" (p. 278), and note the resemblance to Erikson's identity formation process as outlined previously.

## Reflexivity and Exploratory Action

Individualization—Bauman (2000) observes—transforms identity from being a given to a task. Giddens (1991), claims that "in the context of post-traditional order, the self becomes a *reflexive project*" (p. 32, italic in original). While psychic reorganization has always been an aspect of transitions in the life of individuals, it was often shaped by rituals. "In the setting of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change" (Giddens 1991, p. 33). In the same vein, Erikson (1968) indicates the developmental advantage of a process of identity construction involving "reflection and observation" and describes in detail the social and personal meaning of such a process. All of them imply engagement in action.

Evidence shows that turning inward and engagement solely in introspection is often not productive as far as self-knowledge is concerned. Apparently, introspection is not likely to reach the unconscious and make the implicit explicit. However, when introspection is not so much about seeking to unearth hidden feelings and motives, and more of a constructive process inferring what these states might be through self narrative, the process could be more beneficial (Wilson and Dunn 2004). Indeed, engagement in self-reflection and exploration is constructive when carried out in relation to others and in interaction.

When tradition does not offer identity grounding, people sense the need for relational frames not so much in established social structures but more through variety of personal relationships and individualized relational experiences which provide the secure base and cues for identity construction. A relational example of a constructive avenue for the development of self-knowledge at a micro level is referred to by Wilson and Dunn (2004) based on empirical findings, which they refer to as "seeing ourselves through the eyes of others" (p. 507), and thus describe a mirroring process in which the self is reflected by others. This is clearly the process indicated by Erikson in the above 'reflection observation' quotation. When a person identifies an aspect of the self as being known to the other it becomes real. Empathic and adequate mirroring promotes one's sense of who one is, and can provide affirmation to the self and confirmation of identity. This relational quality of 'eye-to-eye validation' is depicted by Josselson (1992) in detail, and discussed in the vocational context (Flum 2001b).

Being-in-the-world is the departure point. As can be deduced from the interactivism model, engagement in reflection in a relational context and social practice can

result in a better processing of the self, as well as in the promotion of understanding of the social context. Exploration is carried out within a social system of meaning. Questioning, examining interpretations, and becoming aware of self-culture interaction, facilitates the construction and likely transformation of strategies of action and intentional states.

## Conclusion and Implications

Being-in-the-world does not carry only relational and contextual connotations; it entails a retrospective as well as a prospective view of the self. Developmentally, the potential of growing social- and self-complexity in an increasingly de-traditionalized, late-modern era of globalization and an information age, requires the recognition of the individual as an agentic person psychologically who also performs relational agency (Sugerman and Martin 2011). From a developmental perspective, the self is relationally constituted (e.g. Gergen's (2009) Relational Being; also Erikson 1968) and meaning-making is communally-based (Bruner 1990); simultaneously, the complementary processes of individuation and individualization feed the emerging sense of personal identity and agency, and the construction of *style of one's individuality* cannot be denied. As indicated earlier, when identity is transformed from being a given to being a task and individuals are expected to be capable of and responsible for self-authoring their life, a sense of agency transcends the relational web, as well as being part of it. Reflexivity becomes more and more an essential and repeated link of identity construction, facilitating intention states and action strategies.

Identity as a holistic notion emphasizes the need for an integrative process that ties together experiences through action, aims to interconnect roles and life domains, in an effort to promote coherence. Hence, experiences are reflected upon and assessed in a retrospective as well as a prospective manner; their meanings are constructed in context, while implicit knowledge becomes explicit. A reflexive process involves self-interpretation of action which can relate to manifest behavior, internal processes, and relational interaction as a vehicle to social meaning and mediation of the larger social system (cf. Young and Domene 2012).

Work remains a core life domain. However, the prevailing social discourse implies that the experience of work is increasingly regarded in temporary, often less bounded, terms and a language of risk. Just as the de-traditionalization trend affects identity, the diminishing holding role of the workplace impacts the experience of stability and continuity, and increases uncertainty while boundaries among spheres of life often tend to fade. A fast-changing work environment is characterized as being hypercompetitive and as emphasizing collaboration simultaneously, and the worker "must be 'eager to stay', but also 'ready to leave' if the business is failing or even if it must innovate new projects that no longer require the core competencies of the current workers" (Gee et al. 1996, p. 19). This future outlook discourse,

charged with conflicts and uncertainty, underscores the prevailing demanding task of the transition to adulthood.

By and large, young people face the transition to adulthood unprepared or unequipped for the task of self-authoring their identity in general and for the new world of work in particular. It is no wonder that young people take longer to explore their way into adulthood (Arnett 2000), and often find it difficult to experience a sense of agency, as well as develop a future outlook in adaptive terms as part of identity formation.

On their journey to adulthood, many young people are not provided enough opportunity or challenge to experience self-reflexivity and develop exploratory action approach. Identity construction is, after all, a developmental task that requires attention, and identity work should become an educational goal (Flum and Kaplan 2006). Counselors, and especially school counselors, career counselors and counselors whose perspective is developmental, can play a key role in introducing and guiding the implementation of this task.

### ***Implication: An Educational Example or a Lesson from Education***

Schools are believed to be an important context for identity formation (Erikson 1968; Flum and Kaplan 2012; Grotevant 1987; Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma 2006; Waterman 1989). As a social agent, for instance, and as a place that carries a pivotal meaning in people's lives, schools no doubt affect identity development. Nevertheless, deliberate attempts to introduce identity-enhancing curricula have been scarce (e.g. Waterman 1989; Dreyer 1994) and construct learning based on this perspective (e.g. Faircloth 2009, 2012). Schools usually miss the pedagogical potential to practice identity work and reflexivity and to promote adaptive identity formation and an integrative sense of agency.

Although in societies characterized as post-industrial, one of the features is a diversification of schools, in all levels of the educational system a prevalent hallmark is fragmentation of studies with minimal attention to relevancy to students' actual life and meaning making through reflection. The learning process and construction of knowledge tend to be kept divorced from who the students are, their own perception of themselves and the meaning it conveys for them, personally and collectively. Reflexivity is far from being a foundational action as part and parcel of the educational experience. Indeed, a deliberate focus on action related to the emerging 'who I am' sense of the young individuals (i.e., identity work) to affect development and knowledge construction is rare (e.g., Côté and Levine 2002; Flum and Kaplan 2012).

Recently, Flum and Kaplan (2006) advocated exploratory orientation as an educational goal. We define "exploration as a deliberate internal or external action of seeking and processing information in relation to the self. An outcome of this processing would be the creation of self-relevant meaning with an integrative effect

and thus the facilitation of development” (Flum and Kaplan 2006, p. 100). Hence, a key to our approach is self-reflexivity in the exploratory action; information-seeking and processing is tied up reflectively with the developing self, and the construction of identity and knowledge are mutually enhanced. This kind of action promotes meaning-making, facilitates motivation and engagement in learning, and augments a sense of being-in-the-world with a clarification of intentional states and purpose.

In our implementation of the exploratory action model in education, it is assumed that educational settings provide a social context of peers and teachers as facilitators who play a role in the enactment of exploratory process. Exploratory action is promoted collectively, but experienced by individuals and affects them differentially. The first principle to be applied when an exploratory activity is introduced is *relevancy*. Hence, within a relational context, such as a class or a group of students, a situated action episode is relevant to both the learning material and possibly of interest on some personal level to (at least some of) the students. Three additional principles combine in our conceptual framework to turn the relevant action into a subjectively meaningful experience and promote engagement in constructive identity exploration: An exploration *trigger* refers to a subjective experience of discrepancy (e.g., from current identification or commitment) that in turn elicits motivation to seek information and look for a way (i.e., action) to accommodate new information in a self-relevant manner. The triggered experience may involve an exciting or intriguing sense, but often it feels unsettling or evokes anxiety. In order to be experienced as a challenge rather than a threat, a subjective sense of *safety*, which is usually relationally based, should accompany the exploratory action. *Scaffolding*, which can come in various forms and is provided by others’ action, represents the fourth principle in the conceptual framework. Scaffolds promote students’ effective exploration when they are appropriate to the specific context and hence advance a ‘connection of the dots’ and support the induction of new insights (for a more detailed description see Sinai et al. 2012).

Ideally, the mode of facilitation is open and feels secure enough to allow students to initiate a question, raise an issue, make an observation or simply reflect in the group about situated action in a self-relevant manner. When a safe *exploratory space* is created, a trigger is likely to be effective as a motivational vehicle to engage in the construction of adaptive identity through a personally (or collectively) framed exploratory action and its scaffolding. It should be underscored that an action, linked with where the individual is (even unconsciously) in identity-related terms, has the potential to affect the process, to make it explicit and add an integrative power. It is also likely to affect positively learning motivation (Kaplan and Flum 2009, 2010). The role played by peers, whose experiences are likely to be relatively close or relevant, in producing scaffolds—and hence in the co-construction of the process—is invaluable.

### ***Implication: A Counseling Example of an Action Narrative in Relational Context***

This is applicable in high school as well as in higher education (Flum and Kaplan 2003; Richardson et al. 2009). Once exploratory action becomes an educational goal (Flum and Kaplan 2006; Sinai et al. 2012), an infusion of exploratory activities and reflexive experiences become part of the curriculum and the learning process. Similarly, the same perspective, framework and principles can also be relevant in group counseling, in or out of the educational system. A peers' joint project with a counselor-facilitator may follow an action narrative approach. Adolescents or emerging adults may focus on storytelling to enact exploration. Stories about the self or situated stories can serve as a primary device in the promotion of identity exploration and construction.

Situated stories encapsulate an identity theme that is likely to be linked with a life story. They are defined by McLean et al. (2007) as a "narrative account of personal memory that is created within a specific situation, by particular individuals, for particular audiences, and to fulfill particular goals" (p. 263). McLean et al. (2007) propose a process model of self-development based on their study of situated stories which they entitled: "selves creating stories creating selves". The concept *autobiographical reasoning* (Habermas and Bluck 2000) represents the dynamic process of thinking about the past and linking it with the self. This process, McLean et al. (2007) suggest, is relevant to situated stories as well as to life stories. In storytelling, past experiences are processed in light of the present and with a potential anticipation of the future (Erikson 1968; Richardson et al. 2009). The degree or quality of autobiographical reasoning is related to the framing of the storytelling, to the goal, to the situation and the audience behavior (i.e., engagement, response). In the counseling context, processing is related, for instance, to the framing by the counselor, to others' expression of emotions, to questioning, to the subjective interpretation or experience of whether peers mirror or validate, show interest and care, express a sense of holding and support, identify, or idealize (Josselson 1992). More generally, others may ignore or relate in otherness terms, or share or join, but once the interactive experience touches an *identity nucleus* (a sensitive and core aspect of identity at the time which would have growth or developmental potential) the quality of the relational experience may resonate and scaffold identity construction.

An experience that is talked about with the goal of self-understanding (i.e. exploration), would be associated with more insight and meaning-making as this experience or identity issue is processed in subsequent narratives. When self-understanding is the goal of storytelling, and more connections between the past and the current self are made, autobiographical reasoning is enhanced, and so is the construction of narrative identity.

Stories about the self are also means of construction of narrative identity in context. By reconstructing past experiences in relation to the self, individuals also connect to the social order and organize culture (as claimed by the anthropologist Eisenhart 1995). Similarly, Bruner (1986) asserts that the self cannot be "independent of

one's social-historical existence" (p. 67), and hence this is reflected in stories that provide "a map of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are permissible (or desirable)" (p. 66). Indeed, Bruner further explicates: "In time the young entrant into the culture comes to define his own intentions and even his own history in terms of the characteristic cultural dramas in which he plays a part" (p. 67). By making the intertwined connection of self and society/culture more explicit, the individual is more likely to exercise agency (both individually and relationally) and enact change on these different levels (Eisenhart 1995).

Hence, layers of identity work interact with the social discourse and the style of individuality and become more explicit, real and confirmed. And in the process they turn into action and promote the crystallization of purpose. A future-oriented projection of the self is enabled in an adaptive manner, with relative flexibility and openness to experience, integrated with a sense of growing personal and relational agency.

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## Chapter 8

# Emotion-Focused Psychotherapy: An Alternative Framework for Career Counseling

Jeanne C. Watson

Emotion-focused psychotherapy (EFT) is a humanistic-experiential approach to human functioning that grew out of both client-centered and gestalt psychotherapy. Its emphasis on growth and development makes it an ideal companion to action theory approaches to career counseling. One of the goals of counseling is to free clients from “immobility” so that they can move forward in their lives. Polkinghorne (1990) quoting Zunker suggests that the role of career counselors is to increase awareness in order to enable clients to choose among different courses of action. In this chapter, we present some of the assumptions underlying EFT along with specific theoretical concepts and ways of working with clients who are struggling with issues related to their career and life paths.

EFT shares a number of fundamental assumptions about human functioning with other humanistic-experiential approaches and action theorists (Watson et al. 2011; Polkinghorne 1990; Valach and Young 2004). Primary among these is a phenomenological perspective that emphasizes the importance of subjective experiencing to provide an understanding of human beings and their functioning. Second is the belief that the actualizing or growth tendency is an important developmental force that propels organisms towards adaptation and growth. Third is the view that people are capable of self-awareness and self-reflection and that this enables them to be self-determining agents enabling them to choose among different courses of action. Fourth, there is a strong belief, with growing empirical support, that these fundamental human capacities are optimized in relationships characterized by respect, genuineness, acceptance, and empathic understanding (Watson et al. 2011).

The emphasis on phenomenological experience is important in two respects, first in terms of the quality of the therapeutic relationship, and second in terms of the primacy of affective and subjective experience to understand human beings. It is through their senses and the resulting subjective experience that individuals come to know the world and determine their needs. A phenomenological, discovery-oriented approach in which clients are the experts on their inner experience is emphasized

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and practiced. Humanistic therapists are encouraged to bracket their assumptions and refrain from imposing solutions and meaning on their clients' experiences. Instead the core task in therapy is to be fully present with clients as they connect the events in their lives into meaningful narratives that will provide the self-knowledge and understanding they require to make choices and move forward. The process of acquiring self-knowledge and self-determination is assisted, as clients are encouraged to determine the validity of their narratives and choices by referring to their inner subjective experience and organismic valuing process. Clients are encouraged to understand their experiences from the inside out. In turn EFT therapists provide clients with a responsive, safe, and empathic therapeutic relationship to facilitate self-exploration, growth, and healing (Watson et al. 2011).

A second major assumption of humanistic and experiential approaches is a belief in the organism's actualizing tendency. Carl Rogers (1959) conceived of the actualizing tendency as a biological imperative that propelled all systems towards greater differentiation and growth. Others have suggested that the actualizing tendency is directional and places the self at the center in a more or less intentional search for meaning (Tageson 1982). According to these theorists human beings like all living creatures grow and develop throughout the lifespan. While people work to maintain stability and predictability they are also curious and require stimulation such that they are capable of dreaming and aspiring to different ways of being and acting. This view sees people as influenced by their past and present experiences, as well as their goals and expectations for the future (Rice and Greenberg 1992; Watson et al. 2011).

A third assumption shared by experiential therapists is that human beings are self-reflective agents with the capacity to symbolize and use language so that they can reflect on experience and choose between different courses of action (Polkinghorne 1990; Rice and Greenberg 1992; Watson et al. 2011). It is this capacity to be self-reflective that enables human beings to grow and change. People are beings who symbolize their experiences and for whom things matter and have significance (Taylor 1985).

Philosophers, neuroscientists, and experiential psychotherapists recognize that people are alerted to the significance and importance of situations, events, and people by their feelings and desires (Damasio 1994; Gendlin 1962, 1996; Watson and Greenberg 1996; Polkinghorne 1990). Through their feelings, people come to understand the impact of their experiences, and gain an understanding of how they need to respond and communicate with others (Greenberg et al. 1996; Rogers 1959; Taylor 1985; Watson and Greenberg 1996). This view sees people as agents who have the capacity to choose among competing wishes, desires, needs and values. Taylor (1985) referred to the capacity to choose among alternative courses of action as second-order valuing: a type of reflection that is more than understanding and includes the capacity to evaluate and make choices that are consistent with a person's deepest values and desires. He suggested that there are two ways of evaluating experience: first in accord with one's immediate needs and desires, and the second in accord with specific value frameworks that have the capacity to override more immediate concerns in terms of higher order values (Taylor 1985).

Experiential theorists see people as agents capable of self-determination and choice, the capacity for which is facilitated by the ability to represent experience symbolically and to reflect on it (May and Yalom 1989; Fagan 1974; Perls 1973; Taylor 1985; Tiryakian 1962). It is recognized that there is a dynamic interaction between language and other forms of symbolic expression and feelings such that as each are formed they influence the other in an ongoing dialectic (Gendlin 1962, 1996; Taylor 1985; Watson and Greenberg 1996). Humanistic philosophers recognize that experience becomes known as it is symbolized and put into words (Gendlin 1996; Taylor 1985). As experience is symbolized, human beings are able to reflect on and evaluate it to determine its validity as well as determine different courses of action.

The capacity for self-reflection is fostered in psychotherapy as clients come to know their feelings, desires, values, and assumptions so that they can choose among different courses of action to live in ways that are more personally meaningful and fulfilling (Watson and Greenberg 1996). An important goal of experiential psychotherapy is to facilitate clients' awareness of their organismic experience as they engage in self-reflection to exercise choice and become the agents of their own experience.

The fourth assumption concerns the centrality and quality of human relationships. Humanistic psychotherapists believe in the uniqueness and value of every human being and emphasize respect and caring for each person's subjective experience. The goal of humanistic psychotherapists is to cultivate "I-Thou" exchanges in contrast to those between subjects and objects (Rogers 1959). They are committed to respecting the other and to developing authentic, egalitarian relationships.

## **Emotion-Focused Theory**

The concept of the person's subjective experiencing and affective processing is central to emotion-focused psychotherapy. Along with the development of personal narratives to order events in their lives, a primary goal is to help clients listen to and become aware of their inner experience during sessions so that they can symbolize it and come to know and understand it in order that they might develop new and different ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting. There are a number of concepts that are essential to an understanding of emotion-focused psychotherapy. These are emotion schemes, emotion response types, and emotion processing and regulation.

### ***Emotion Schemes***

Emotion schemes are formed in interaction with the environment and represent an amalgamation of the bodily felt sense, the perception of the stimulus, the action tendency or need indicated by the emotion, and the symbolized meaning of the

experience (Greenberg, Rice & Elliott 1996; Watson et al. 2010). This concept is similar to Damasio's (1994) construct of somatic-markers (Watson 2011). Damasio (1994) defined *somatic markers* as events, and/or stimuli that are marked by specific emotional responses, or the links that form between perceptions and emotion as a result of experience. According to Damasio (1994) somatic markers are formed as emotion becomes attached to specific environmental triggers and stimuli and their formation enables one to predict and plan future actions. Another benefit of somatic markers is that they enable people to generalize feelings to other stimuli without direct experience of them providing flexibility of action and enhancing survival.

EFT sees clients' difficulties in living as emanating from problematic emotion schemes. Emotion schemes are made up of specific autobiographical memories, perceptions, feelings, needs, and actions and when activated provide a lens through which different situations can be interpreted and understood, and provide plans for acting in the moment. Emotion schemes can be problematic when they are formed during experiences that are not properly processed. These emotion schemes can be the source of intense reactions that may be incommensurate with current situations. One of the objectives for experiential therapists is to assist clients to access problematic emotion schemes and process their organismic experience. This enables clients to see how they are blocking or distorting their experience and gives them the opportunity to access all aspects of it so they can develop new ways of expressing their feelings and realizing their needs in a way that is balanced with their own system of values (Elliott et al. 2004; Watson & Greenberg 1996). Consistent with an action theory approach once clients are aware of their emotional responses, they can discriminate which responses are healthy and useful to guide them, and which are maladaptive and need to be changed (Elliott et al. 2004; Greenberg et al. 1996; Greenberg and Paivio 1997).

### ***Emotion Response Types***

Individuals learn to regulate their emotions and develop a range of emotional responses including *primary*, *maladaptive*, *secondary*, and *instrumental* in interaction with their environments. *Primary* adaptive emotions, from an EFT perspective, are those authentic, core, and immediately experienced and congruent reactions to specific environmental stimuli. *Maladaptive* emotions are those problematic reactions that are linked to benign or neutral stimuli as a result of negative or difficult life experiences. For example, when loving responses provoke anger in people who have been abused – so that they see an outstretched hand as threatening as opposed to loving or supportive. *Secondary* emotions are those emotions that are developed to distort or camouflage primary emotions; for example anger to cover vulnerability and sadness. *Instrumental* emotions refer to those behavioural reactions that are inauthentic and manufactured in order to elicit a specific response in another or to realize a specific objective.

## ***Emotion Processing and Regulation***

A primary objective in EFT is to facilitate and assist clients to process their emotions and learn new ways of regulating them. Emotional processing requires individuals to become aware of their inner experience, symbolize and differentiate it to label it and come to understand and know it better. Both action theorists and emotion-focused therapists recognize that once subjective experience is understood and known then people are in a better position to determine their needs and identify ways of behaving that are self-enhancing. As individuals become clearer about their feelings and needs, they learn to modulate and regulate their emotions and the expression of their emotional experience. Instead of merely reacting to their environments, which can be problematic, they can respond as responsible self-determining agents, a central tenet of action theory.

The capacity to modulate and regulate emotional experience is learned and internalized in interaction with the environment. For example, people experience and internalize the ways in which caretakers respond to their feelings and expression of emotion and in turn adopt these evaluations, rules of behaviour, and ways of treating their experience. Subsequently these norms and behaviours can become amplified as cultural and social norms are internalized. In supportive and nurturing environments people develop the capacity to regulate their affect in ways that are personally and socially enhancing – they learn to symbolize all aspects of their experience, label it in conscious awareness, modulate their levels of arousal and expression, and act in ways that help them meet their needs in more or less socially acceptable ways. However, in negative and unsupportive environments emotional processing can become disrupted and dysregulated so that people do not attend to their emotions and inner experience to help guide their actions or are unable to regulate their levels of arousal, and express their emotions in personally satisfying and socially acceptable ways.

EFT works with individuals to transform and correct maladaptive ways of processing emotional experience. A key to effective emotional processing and regulation is the symbolization of subjective experience. People do this when they become aware of their bodily reactions and label their experience in words. This requires that they are able to tolerate and accept their emotional experience. Once it becomes activated and symbolized in the session people are able to reflect on it to evaluate its validity and understand their needs to plan their future actions. For example being in a safe, accepting relationship with a therapist, clients come to listen to and attend to their emotional experience and represent it in awareness. Being heard by an empathically attuned other helps clients' to symbolize their outer and inner experience so that they can come to know and trust it. The capacity to see, listen, and attend to experience can be distorted or extinguished in environments that require people to silence their innate organismic reactions.

An important goal in both EFT and action theory is to help individuals find their voices and become more self-reflective, active agents, who are able to make more satisfying life choices. EFT works on the principle that the way people process



affective information and create meaning produces different psychological states. Different affective states lead to different needs and options. With changes in their affective states and the corresponding self-reorganization people are able to generate alternative ways of being and seeing the world thereby increasing their degrees of freedom. These types of changes are especially pertinent for working with people who are concerned with developing and modifying their career trajectories and can assist them to address challenges that they encounter in their life projects.

### ***Developmental Processes***

A number of developmental processes that are important to becoming a fully functioning person have been identified, including *emotional processing*, *differentiation of self*, *treatment of self* and the *development of somatic markers* (Watson 2011). *Emotional processing* is the capacity to know and effectively modulate emotional processing and expression. *Differentiation of self* refers to the process of differentiating inner experience in order to accurately symbolize it in words as well as the process of differentiating self from other. This latter aspect occurs as people move gradually from dependence to greater independence on the path to becoming self-governing individuals. The process of becoming independent requires that individuals learn to differentiate their experience from that of others. Parallel to the process of differentiation and in interaction with their environments, people learn ways of regulating their organismic experience. Negative and positive ways of *Treating the Self* develop in interaction with the environment and specifically significant others from whom ways of treating inner subjective experience and modes of expression are learned. The fourth process, the *development of somatic markers* occurs as a result of interactions with the environment when primary emotions become linked to specific triggers and environmental stimuli to guide behaviour and enhance survival.

These four processes are important to consider in the formation and development of life projects especially those having to do with career. For example, if differentiation of self is halted or impaired then individuals may have difficulty identifying career aspirations or be at a loss as to how to realize them. We will address how difficulties with *emotional processing*, *differentiation of self and other* and *negative treatment of self* can impact the development of career choices and life projects and illustrate how these might be worked with in career counseling.

Self-other differentiation is a process that occurs naturally as people move from a state of greater dependence at birth to greater independence as they grow and develop. Rogers (1959) referred to this as the process of becoming self-governing and viewed it as related to the organism's actualizing tendency. As they grow people develop their cognitive, affective and physical capacities. In the process of developing and learning to process and modulate their emotional experience, including acquiring the skills to be aware of, attend to, label, process, and regulate their inner subjective experience, they learn to differentiate their experience from that of others as they become more independent. This process of differentiation relies on people

being able to distinguish their subjective experience from that of others (Decety and Ickes 2009; Watson et al. 2011). Recent research has highlighted that the capacity to differentiate the subjective experience of self and other is facilitated by the structure and function of mirror neurons (Iacoboni 2009). In addition, one's awareness of the distinctiveness of the experiences of the self from that of others is informed by higher order cognitive capacities as people begin to see and understand that others have unique vantages in the world so that their experience is likely to be different from one's own. The inability to take this view is often experienced by others as egocentric.

The process of differentiation can be interrupted or distorted. For example, neglectful environments can hinder people from realizing their potential as they may fail to provide adequate structure and guidance so that people can develop their abilities and talents. In contrast while some people may receive too little guidance, some may receive too much and, together with a need to please and be cooperative, they may disregard their own organismic experience in order to try to follow career and life paths dictated by others, for example, a child who becomes an accountant in a family business to please a parent, in spite of an innate preference to work with her hands. People who suppress or subvert aspects of their organismic experience might benefit from differentiating themselves more from significant others so as to give voice to their own needs while still acknowledging and respecting the needs of others. This requires that they become more aware of their inner experiencing and differentiate their needs and see them as distinct from those of others to become more autonomous and self-governing.

Another example is provided by cases of role-reversal where children have caretakers who are physically or psychologically incapacitated so that the child may subvert their own immediate needs in order to care for their parent. When people are required to silence or ignore their own experience, they lose touch with their own inner organismic sensing and valuing process as they orient to the needs and wishes of others and their environment instead of attending to their own. As a result of ignoring their own inner experience, people may have difficulty making personally satisfying life choices including those related to career (Valach 1990; Young and Valach 2002, 2004).

Parallel to the process of differentiating self from other is that of learning how to treat oneself and one's experience. People learn to treat themselves more or less positively depending on how others receive their emotional experience and its expression. They learn whether their experience is acceptable, cherished, valued, and how it can be regulated and expressed or whether it should be controlled, suppressed, denied, managed, or ignored (Benjamin 1974; Sullivan 1953; Perls et al. 1951). Rogers referred to the development of conditions of worth, or the ways in which people come to view and evaluate themselves and their experience, as a result of the evaluations of others. Perls (1969) referred to values introjected from significant others and the environment that guide behaviour.

In EFT some of these negative patterns of treating experience have been identified as self-interruption or the basis for conflict splits (Greenberg et al. 1996). Recently Greenberg and Watson (2006) identified how critical ways of treating the

self can contribute to depression. However, there are multiple ways that people can treat themselves negatively, including interrupting, silencing, neglecting, and otherwise suppressing experience that can be addressed in therapy using two chair work (Watson 2011). For example, children who are told that it is unacceptable to cry or that they must be brave, may learn to suppress their experience and ignore it as they attempt to meet the expectations of significant others. This type of behaviour may generalize to other aspects of their organismic experience such that it is ignored or silenced as they try to cope with painful or difficult life experiences.

### ***Therapeutic Tasks***

A number of therapeutic tasks in EFT can be useful to work with people who are experiencing difficulties and challenges with their careers and life projects as a result of impaired *differentiation* or *negative treatment of self*. These tasks include empathic attunement, empty-chair, and two-chair work. Empathic attunement is one of the primary ways that EFT therapists help clients address difficulties with emotional processing and the development of narratives about self by helping them *attend to* and *symbolize* their own inner and outer experience. EFT therapists facilitate differentiation of self and other with the use of *empty chair* and *two-chair* work. As they engage in these tasks in psychotherapy, clients become aware of their organismic experience, label, accept, and validate it as an important source of information that they need to weigh when making important life decisions.

The primary objective of many of the tasks in EFT is to provide clients with ways to become aware of and access their organismic experience in the session. Once they are aware of their inner experience they can begin to symbolize it and understand the impact of events on them and become aware of their own needs and goals to effect changes in their behaviour. By exploring and becoming aware of their emotional experience, clients come to explicate and reveal the emotion schemes that they have developed in interaction with the world. Once they are aware of the emotion schemes clients can explore their relevance to current situations and process the painful experiences underlying them to develop alternative ones that are more appropriate to their current circumstances.

*Empathic Attunement and Responding* An important task in helping people develop their life projects is to have them attend to and become aware of their inner experience to understand the impact of current situations and serve as a compass to guide them in the future. Clients learn to attend to and value their own experience when their therapists and counselors listen and attend to it and try to empathically understand and accept their clients' experiences (Barrett-Lennard 1997; Bozarth 1990, 1997). Rogers clearly articulated what this type of listening requires when he postulated the necessary and sufficient conditions of empathy, congruence, and positive regard. While these have generated much debate and research, it is clear that for a therapist to be experienced as empathic in a healing relationship then it is essential that understanding be coupled with sincerity and transparency, otherwise known as

congruence, and non-judgmental acceptance. Bozarth (1990) has highlighted that it is not empathy alone that is healing in relationship but acceptance of the other. And when experienced together they are extremely powerful. Empathic understanding helps clients become aware of their inner experience and come to accept and honor it in ways that might not have been possible before. As clients give voice to and label their inner experience it becomes more clearly differentiated and known and defines the self vis-à-vis the other such that it contributes to the further differentiation of self and other.

*Empty-Chair Tasks* Further differentiation of experience as well as self and other can be facilitated by empty chair work. One of the primary goals of this task is to facilitate clients' access to their own usually painful experience in relation to a significant other. To help clients access their feelings, it is suggested that they try to imagine or visualize the other. It can be especially helpful to have clients characterize the demeanor of the other to distill the essence of their experience. For example, whether the other is imagined as smiling and engaged or as distant and looking away and consequently experienced as cold and withdrawn. Once clients have visualized the other, they are better able to get in touch with their inner experience so they can label it and express it in ways that they may not have been able to do previously. This facilitates the process of differentiation, as they give voice to their experience and begin to assert and define themselves vis-a-vis the other. Clients usually experience significant shifts as they begin to see themselves and others more clearly. As they acknowledge and express their own organismic experience and needs they are able to care for themselves while at the same time recognizing and respecting the limits and needs of others.

This task can be very powerful in so far as clients are able to discover and voice aspects of their experience that may have been silenced or forgotten. In so doing they may begin to apprehend needs and longings that have been suppressed, which now they have a chance of realizing. The expression of newly recognized or discovered aspects of experience can be empowering for clients and feel especially validating when heard and accepted by an empathic other. One of the primary objectives in empty chair work is to support clients in expressing and acknowledging their needs and aspirations vis-à-vis important or significant others. In so doing they begin to take charge of their life projects and steer career trajectories that may be more personally satisfying than if they had allowed their own aspirations and needs to remain submerged in those of others.

*Two-Chair Work* Another therapeutic task that has been developed and modeled to help clients resolve conflicts or to become more aware of the negative ways in which they regulate their organismic experience is two-chair work. The two-chair task was introduced by Perls to make people more aware of how they interrupted their experience and inhibited the expression of their feelings, and to resolve decisional conflicts (Greenberg et al. 1996; Perls 1969). Subsequently this task was modeled and more clearly articulated by Greenberg and colleagues (Greenberg et al. 1996).

Two-chair work to resolve decisional conflicts can be useful to help people trying to make career choices. It can help clients articulate the opposing sides of a conflict to better understand their needs, goals, and objectives. In two-chair work clients are asked to voice the opposing sides of a conflict in two different chairs. The objective is to help them plumb the depths of each side to better understand the roots of the conflict, which may be between values and desires; or as a result of maladjusted and negative ways of treating organismic needs and wishes. So, for example, someone reared in a strict religious faith with a strong emphasis on sacrifice and service might have difficulty pursuing a life as a writer feeling that this was selfish and not making an adequate contribution to her community. Alternatively someone who has suppressed his experience and tried to please others may have difficulty knowing what he wants to do as he confronts life choices. Unpracticed at listening to his own inner voice and attending to his inner compass he may need support to attend to and attune to his own needs as he works out a direction that will allow him to live satisfactorily with himself and others.

One of the primary objectives in two-chair work is to help clients see how they are interacting with or treating their organismic experience and to appreciate the impact of critical, negative, controlling, and neglectful behaviour on themselves. With this understanding and appreciation they can decide whether they wish to change the behaviour or develop alternative ways of treating their experience so that they can diminish the pain and confusion that brought them to therapy. So, for example, working with someone for whom being caring and unselfish is a strong value that prevents her from developing her talents and choosing a life project that would be truly satisfying, two-chair work could be helpful to address how she stifles her needs for fear of being selfish. Doing two-chair work the client would have the opportunity to express her values and the reasons why she needs to be unselfish in one chair and then with the therapist's guidance access the feelings and the impact that adhering to the value has on her in the other chair. Empathy helps to regulate relationships both with others and the self (Decety and Ickes 2009; Iacoboni 2009; Watson and Greenberg 2009). Thus, the expression of primary core emotion in the experiencing chair helps the side expressing the values perceive the depth of the pain and respond empathically. With the activation of empathy, such that the other feels concerned, the possibility of an alternative response to alleviate the pain and respond to the expression of need emerges. The recognition of pain and the desire to alleviate it as a function of empathic processes is a fundamental change process in any therapeutic approach.

When therapists are working with their clients doing two-chair work, it can be useful for them to think in relational terms, and be informed by our understanding of couple's therapy. Gottman (1994) in his work with couples observed that the conversation and negotiation will stall if the interaction follows a pattern of blame and defend. Therapists can assist clients to identify negative behaviour and give expression to it in the session. Once the negative self-statements are verbalized the negative behaviour is more conscious and visible. Then therapists can encourage clients to access their response to the negative self-statements. When two sides of the self are in negotiation, it is important to encourage the experiencing chair to express feelings and needs. Thus clients are encouraged to use 'I statements' and to focus on their feelings.

## *Case Study*

The impact of a neglectful environment on a client's career trajectory was clear in the case of Bruce, who presented with depression. Bruce was in his forties when he came to therapy. He was despondent about what he had done with his life and felt trapped and unable to change it. He was highly intelligent and had done well at school where he excelled at mathematics so much so that he was asked to tutor his peers. However, his home environment was somewhat laissez-faire and he felt that he and his siblings had received little guidance or direction. He described his home environment as having very fluid boundaries with people coming and going. It was apparent that the family unit lacked cohesion and that its members were disconnected from each other. He realized that he had felt lost as a child; however, this went unnoticed as he did well in school and was popular with his peers because of his athletic abilities. When he went to university he drifted into the sciences but did not find this satisfying. He became depressed and dropped out of university to work with a non-profit organization working with refugees and immigrant communities. Unfortunately, after a few years he found that he was unable to tolerate the level of pain and distress that many of the children had experienced in their lives and he moved on to casual part-time employment as a lifeguard. This work suited him, as he was able to read and pursue his intellectual interests outside the parameters of formal schooling.

During this period he began to work on an engineering project and participated in community activities. He was satisfied with this project for a number of years and was hopeful that it would be able to sell it. However, this was not the case and when he came to see me he was feeling quite despondent that his work had been rejected and harshly criticized. He was disappointed that his life project had crashed and that he lacked any formal credentials to find a job that would support him and allow him to accumulate the material possessions that many of his peers had acquired over the years. His work being casual and part-time was not highly remunerative and a physical injury to his leg prevented him from taking on alternative work. He felt out of step with society and was frustrated that he did not have work that was satisfying.

As we worked together, it became clear that he had been neglected and in turn had come to neglect his own experience. He was out of touch with his feelings other than his overpowering sense of depression and failure. Thus he had no sense of what he needed or even where to look to try to address his need to feel valued. He wished that he had accomplished something useful and worthwhile. He realized that when he was younger he had not recognized the need for formal credentials before he began to engage in his engineering project, and was frustrated that there were professional associations and requirements that prevented him from accessing the resources he required. After he dropped out of university, he had drifted without any guidance or support to help him develop a satisfying career path.

The focus in therapy was to try to have him attend more to his organismic experience and become aware of his feelings and needs so that he might be able to take better care of himself. He realized that one of the reasons he avoided his experience

was that it was so painful. It took a number of months before he was able to focus on his inner experience and symbolize it in words. Once he did, he recognized that he dismissed his experience and did not attend to it. After engaging in two-chair work he was able to see the emotional cost to himself of ignoring his experience and resolved to become more attentive and supportive of himself. He gradually learned to take better care of himself and became more self-protective and nurturing. As a result of our work together, he decided to develop a small business with a friend where he was able to use some of his aptitudes and skills and begin to build a career that would sustain him in the future.

## Conclusion

Deciding on a career path is a very personal and important decision that can affect the quality of one's life for years to come. Satisfying work brings joy and pleasure as it is being pursued and contributes to a sense of fulfilment towards the end of the life-journey, providing a sense of a life well lived (Valach and Young 2004). However, making satisfying choices that enrich and expand one's life project can be difficult and impeded for those who have experienced adverse life conditions and environments such that they are unable to realize their full potential. Emotion focused therapy can be useful in working with people who present with difficulties in terms of their career choices and life projects. Working with emotional processes and helping people access their emotional experience is vital to assist them in making good and satisfying decisions. Action theorists recognize that most if not all our decisions are informed by emotion (Damasio 1994; Greenberg et al. 1996; Polkinghorne 1990; Young and Friesen 1990). To achieve the goal of developing satisfying life projects people need to be aware, self-reflective agents who attend to their phenomenological experience. Emotion is the compass and guide to the many and varied choices we make in a day and throughout our lives. Helping clients become aware of and attend to this compass can guide them in their career choices whether they are at the beginning of the road or making changes along the way.

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**Part II**  
**Counseling and Contextual Action Theory**

## Chapter 9

# Action in Counselling: A Contextual Action Theory Perspective

José F. Domene, Ladislav Valach and Richard A. Young

Action is increasingly being recognized as an important dimension of counselling in the twenty-first century, and a growing number of theories and approaches are explicitly addressing the role of action in practice. In addition to incorporating action into existing theories of counselling, the field may also benefit from developing principles for practice that are derived directly from frameworks for conceptualizing action as it occurs in the daily life contexts of individuals. Young and colleagues' contextual action theory (CAT) provides this kind of integrated framework for understanding human action and, in this chapter, we articulate what a CAT-informed approach to counselling practice might involve. In order to do so, however, it is first necessary to describe CAT and how action is conceptualized within the theory.

### Development of Contextual Action Theory

CAT is rooted in von Cranach's (von Cranach and Valach 1983) understanding of human action in everyday life. It applies to the concept of "career" as used outside of occupational psychology (Valach 1990) and adopts a 'person-in-context' frame of understanding that is related to the ecological and contextual perspectives of John Dewey, George Mead and Lev Vygotsky (Young et al. 1996). Action theory also makes use of the notion of 'project,' a concept that has appeared in the writings of Richardson (2000), Riverin-Simard (2000) and most notably, Little (1983, 1999).

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## *Conceptualizing Action in Daily Life and in Counselling*

Within CAT, actions are defined as intentional, individual or joint processes that are oriented towards achieving a desired end state or goal (Young and Valach 2004; Young et al. 1996, 2010). It must be noted, however, that although action is understood to be goal-directed, it does not always appear rational to the observer or even to the agent. That is, action is sometimes organized and motivated by unconscious processes that may only be apparent to others or when that action is reflected upon after the fact (Young and Domene 2012), such as when a client attempts to construct an understanding of why she engaged in an action between sessions that appears to be counterproductive to attaining her goals. Indeed, evidence is beginning to emerge that unconscious processes can generate actions in counselling sessions (Dyer et al. 2010). Action is also viewed as constructed through language and social representation. That is, human action is embedded within a social context, a context that cannot be ignored when formulating an understanding of that action. As such, action is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that must be understood from multiple perspectives, and from multiple levels of organization.

### **Perspectives of Action**

CAT theorists propose that any particular action can be viewed from three distinct perspectives, each of which provides distinct information about a phenomenon (Young et al. 2010). Action can be understood from the perspective of *manifest behavior*—the readily observable sequence of behavior involved in carrying out an activity. The behaviours of talking, listening, arguing and yelling in which an adolescent engages in a conversation with her psychiatrist about the possibility of reducing her medications are examples of manifest behavior.

A second perspective on action is *internal processes*—the subjective cognitive and emotional processes that a person experiences during an activity. This perspective on action encompasses, for example, both the adolescent's anger at having been placed on medication against her will and the thought that the psychiatrist does not recognise the improvements in her symptoms underlie her manifest behavior of talking. These internal cognitive and emotional processes are understood to steer, control, and regulate action by providing a person with a sense of how he or she should react in terms of manifest behavior in a situation, that is, in response to their internal experience, and by contributing to the construction of the final dimension of action, social meaning.

Action can be understood from the perspective of *social meaning*, that is, the explanations that people construct about their action both for themselves and when describing their situation to other people, such as their counselors. Social meaning, such as norms, rules and conventions, is operational in how others describe ongoing actions, as well as in how actors generate goals. Obviously, any discourses and narratives about actions are based on, constitute, and construct social meaning.

Furthermore, social meaning includes not only their description of the manifest behavior aspects of action and what may be going on for them at the internal process level, but also the intentions and purposes they provide about what is occurring. To continue the previous example, when the adolescent later describes to her mother her unsuccessful attempt to convince the psychiatrist to reduce her medication, the pair may construct an understanding of the incident based on the doctor being a professional and knowing what is best; or, alternatively, based on the construction that the doctor is sexist, and simply unwilling to trust the opinion of a young woman.

### Organization of Action

In addition to these perspectives of action, the theory proposes a three-tier hierarchical organization of action (Young et al. 2010). At the lowest level of organisation are the *elements* of an action: the verbal phrases, physical movements, and environmental features involved in the performance of a task. For example, the action of having a conversation may involve elements such as statements of opinion, questions, smiles, shrugging of shoulders, and sitting in an interview room. An element of an action does not occur in isolation, but in sequence with other elements.

A sequence of contiguous elements that are directed towards a common goal or a subgoal is a *functional step*, the medial level of action organisation. Functional steps are the intentional means by which each participant moves towards their goals, and consist of sub-stages that are present in an action. For example, functional steps in a conversation may include introducing a topic for discussion, presenting an opinion, finding out information, and closing the conversation to engage in some other activity.

At the highest level of action organisation are the *intentional frameworks* of actions, which include conscious goals. These are the overall intentions and purposes of the people who are engaged in that action. For example, the goal for engaging in a conversation may be to discuss a person's recreational activities, to share important news with another person, or to obtain advice about a problem he is experiencing. Normally, the goals of an action are reflected in the functional steps and elements that comprise the action. For example, the functional steps taken by a mother whose goal is to find out whether her daughter is enjoying competitive weight-lifting are going to be different from those involved in convincing her son to take up the sport.

Furthermore, the levels within this organization of action relate to other levels in a specific manner. Higher levels of action organization relate to lower levels by supplying reasons or motivations behind those lower levels of action. For example, the reason why a client engages in the element of "asking a question" of her therapist is to achieve the function of seeking information, and the reason why she is finding out information is to achieve her goal of evaluating the therapist's trustworthiness. Conversely, the lower levels of action are the mechanisms by which a higher level of action is accomplished, or at least attempted. To continue with the previous example, how the client achieves her intentional framework of deciding whether to engage in therapy may involve pursuing goals such as evaluating the therapist's

trustworthiness, identifying the emotional, temporal, or material costs of pursuing therapy, and estimating the likelihood of success. In turn, the goal of evaluating the honesty of one's therapist might be accomplished through functional steps such as seeking information, evaluating the therapist's reactions, and setting a test/trap for the therapist. Finally, elements such as asking questions with a certain physical quality of voice, listening intently, and nodding for the therapist to continue may all be part of how the function of seeking information is achieved.

## Systems of Action

Individual and joint actions occur in an immediate or short-term temporal period; a specific action occurs in the moment. However, the goals and intentional frameworks of action may not be achievable in the immediate term. In a sequence of counselling, an individual session may be conceptualized as action taken toward the longer-term goal that brought the client to therapy, but even in the briefest therapy models, those goals are not likely to be achieved in a single session. The entire sequence of counselling sessions that a client experiences represents a more complex system of action that remains focused on achieving a particular set of goals.

Individual and joint actions that occur over a somewhat longer temporal period and coalesce around a specific purpose are described within CAT as *projects* (Young et al. 2010). In this context, a project is defined as a goal-directed mid-term process comprising individual and group actions. It is goal-directed in the sense that a project is something that an individual or group intentionally works towards; there is an identifiable end state that is being sought. A project is 'mid-term' with respect to its temporal frame: projects encompass more than what can be accomplished in the immediate term, and yet have some identifiable ending point, that is, when the project goals are accomplished. Young and colleagues' notion of project is similar to the concept of 'personal projects' espoused by Little (1983, 1999) with a number of exceptions (e.g., projects are occurring and not reflected processes; different participants in a project may not understand or be equally informed about the organization of a joint project). Further, projects are typically thought of as jointly, rather than individually constructed and pursued by pairs or groups of persons working together to achieve mutual goals. Projects are completely intertwined with specific actions in that people intentionally engage in a variety of actions over time to achieve the joint projects they have constructed with significant individuals in their lives. Conversely, they may choose to avoid actions that interfere or are incongruent with the goals of their projects.

Furthermore, the notion of project may be a useful way to conceptualize the counselling endeavor. By its very nature, counselling is driven by goals. Depending on the therapist's theoretical orientation, these goals may be determined primarily by the client, primarily by the therapist, or more or less equally by both. Regardless of who takes the lead in formulating therapeutic goals, they must agree upon by both parties and pursued together over time. As such, counselling itself becomes a joint project, that is, one that is goal-directed, mid-term in temporal length, and

comprising individual and joint actions. This kind of project motivates much, if not all, the actions of the therapist and the clients during the therapeutic hour and beyond, for example, the therapist's action of keeping records, the client's action of actively reflecting on what occurred in session.

The final and most complex system of action is that of *career*. Within CAT, a career is conceptualized as a framework by which an individual constructs understanding about how their individual and joint actions are connected over long-term periods of time, and linked to goals and plans (Young et al. 1996, 2010). In comparison to projects, careers typically involve a greater range of actions and goals, and may not have a specific end point. Indeed, specific projects may be a part of a career. As in other contemporary theories of vocational psychology such as career construction theory (Savickas, this volume) and the system theory framework of career (Patton, this volume), the notion of career is not limited to occupation in CAT. Clients may construct and pursue careers in domains of life other than work, for example, an unpaid but, nonetheless, life-long career as a singer in a church choir; a "friendship career" that two individuals act to maintain over the course of decades.

Neither do careers necessarily have a positive valence. A client who holds a grudge against an ex-spouse may, for decades after their divorce, maintain a conflictual relationship and act in ways to antagonize and seek revenge against his former partner. This conflict may eventually become a career for him, one that he does not know how to end, and for which he seeks counselling. Psychological problems such as an eating disorder or suicidality can also, over time, be conceptualized as careers (Socholotiuk, this volume; Valach et al. 2002b). In an 'eating disorder career' or 'suicide career,' individuals organize their lives and actions over long periods of time to maintain or attain their desired state, for example, continued restriction of caloric intake; repeated attempts to end one's life.

## Counselling from a CAT Perspective

Rather than providing a specific system of procedures for conducting psychotherapy, CAT proposes a general approach to counselling. As Young et al. (2011) suggested, the process of counselling from a CAT framework involves five key tasks that the client and therapist engage in together: (a) creating and maintaining an effective working alliance, (b) identifying the organization and systems of action that are salient in the client's life, (c) addressing problematic actions, projects, and careers, (d) addressing to emotion and emotional memory, and (e) connecting what occurs in counselling with the client's daily life. These therapeutic tasks occur simultaneously rather than in a particular order and are ongoing rather than being taken for granted after initially achieving them. For example, attending to the working alliance is important throughout counselling, even after an effective working alliance is created at the beginning of the process. They are also by no means unique to CAT-informed counselling and, in fact, different practitioners may choose to accomplish

them using different specific approaches or strategies. Furthermore, the ways that these tasks are addressed are likely to vary based on individual characteristics of the client and therapists, as well as the specific context in which counselling occurs. Nonetheless, counselling from a CAT perspective involves the achievement of these five tasks, and action plays an important role within each task.

### *Working Alliance*

A wide range of theoretical perspectives identifies the importance of the working (or therapeutic, or counselling) alliance in therapy, and a large body of empirical literature provides evidence for the central and direct role that this relationship has in determining the outcomes of counselling and psychotherapy (Constantino et al. 2002; Flückiger et al. 2012; Horvath 2001; Horvath and Greenberg 1994; Norcross 2001). It is not surprising then, that creating an effective alliance at the beginning of counselling, and working to maintain that alliance throughout the process of counselling are considered to be a central task in CAT-informed counselling. Action is central to the formation and ongoing maintenance of an effective working alliance. Such a relationship does not simply occur, but rather is a goal that must be achieved through intentional and specific actions on the part of both counselor and client (Horvath and Greenberg 1994), although the counselor may be more cognizant of certain aspects of this goal than the client. Similarly, actions such as the client choosing to not disclose information to the counselor or the counselor being overly directive and unresponsive to the client's preferred direction have been found to interfere with the alliance (Bedi et al. 2012). Indeed, its inherent goal-directed, action-oriented stance is one reason that CAT frames the therapeutic relationship in terms of the work alliance rather than in psychodynamic or humanistic-existential terms, where the relationship could be interpreted as occurring without intentional action (Young et al. 2011).

Using a CAT framework allows counselors to examine the nature of their alliance with the client, and to identify potential directions if there is a rupture or stall in the process. To do so, it necessary to frame the working alliance itself a project that is jointly constructed and pursued by the client and the therapist. This alliance project is intertwined with, but distinct from, the client and counselor's counselling outcome projects, that is, what they are attempting to achieve through counselling. In the alliance project, establishing and maintaining an effective counselling relationship becomes a key goal, with both parties engaged in actions to achieve it. Research has begun to emerge that confirms that the relationship between client and counselor can become a project in itself during counselling, as well a means to achieve other, outcome-oriented projects, such as identity formation or career planning. Specifically, Young et al. (2011) found that all of the 12 counselor–client pairings in their study of counselling for the transition to adulthood constructed counselling relationship projects and intentionally engaged in actions to maintain that relationship throughout the entire sequence of counselling, rather than focusing



on the relationship only in the initial phases of therapy. These actions included the joint action of explicitly discussing the relationship and the individual action of reflecting upon and evaluating the relationship.

A CAT perspective on the working alliance suggests several specific tasks that may be beneficial for counselors to engage in during counselling. If the alliance is a project, then it may be beneficial to explicitly name and discuss this project with the client early on in the process, identifying it as an important part of counselling, clarifying what kind of relationship each person is expecting, and negotiating what will be necessary to maintain an working alliance. This discussion might include the counselor's expectations around completing between-session tasks she assigns and the client's expectation of how the counselor will respond to the information that he reveals. Explicitly identifying the working alliance as a project also provides convenient language for periodically assessing the quality of the alliance and counselor–client relationship, by talking about checking in on the alliance project itself, and inviting the client to raise the issue if he or she notices a problem with it. This can, in turn, suggest one of the CAT-informed ways to encourage an effective working alliance described by Valach and Young (2012) in their case study of conducting CAT-informed therapy with a Swiss woman, which include (a) culturally appropriate demonstrations of empathy and basic counselling skills, (b) jointly constructing counselling goals that are in line with the client's own on-going goal-directed systems, and (c) attending to all levels of the systems of action (actions, projects, careers) in maintaining a therapeutic relationship with the client.

Furthermore, if there is a rupture in the working alliance, CAT concepts can be used to reflect on what occurred and identify specific issues that are contributing to the problem. For example, in terms of the organization of action, were there aspects the counselor's action elements that contributed to the problem (e.g., too much, or too little, use of questions)? Similarly, did the counselor and client have goals for the session that were incongruent, leading to substantial amounts of effort and energy being expended on attempting, on some subliminal level, to convince the other party to go in the direction that each person desired? In terms of the perspectives on action, was some kind of incongruence between the manifest behavior, internal steering processes and social meaning of actions that occurred during the session? In these ways, CAT can help counselors to systematically reflect on what may be occurring to interfere with the working alliance.

### ***Organization and Systems of Action***

When counselling from a CAT perspective, it is important for the counselor to conceptualize the client and his or her life in terms of the organization and systems of action proposed by the theory and to identify which of these action systems are salient in the context of counselling (Valach and Young 2012; Young et al. 2011). This task of conceptualizing the client's situation in terms of elements, functional steps, and goals (action organization) and in terms of actions, projects and careers

and how these are interconnected (action systems) requires counselors to be familiar with CAT and comfortable with applying the theory to understanding people in context. Typically, the organization and systems of action in a client's life are assessed in a narrative way by asking clients to tell their story, rather than through the use of formal assessment instruments. Additionally, clients reveal their actions and projects as they interact with counsellors. For example, that personality is sometimes described as the way a person relates to others (Andersen and Chen 2002; Baldwin 1992; Curtis 1991), and counselors can observe such actions in the counselling session. As with all five tasks, understanding the organization and systems of action does not occur in a single phase of the therapy but emerges throughout the course of counselling. For example, several sessions into a sequence of counselling, a client may provide new information about her circumstances that leads to greater understanding of her goals, or the ways that a client engages in actions between sessions could reveal previously obscured links between these actions and a negative or destructive project that he feels unable to discontinue.

Developing an understanding of the organization and systems of action in the client's life allows the counselor and client to distinguish more clearly how a problem is situated in the client's life, and what resources are available to the client in addressing it (Young et al. 2011). Furthermore, understanding action in these ways permits counselors to distinguish between different types of problems, such as when the elements in a client's life reveal that the problem is primarily one of regulation, as opposed to a situation in which there is a problem with steering processes (goals) or control processes (functional steps). Finally, developing this understanding of action should increase the client's awareness of how their actions, projects, and careers are connected to each other, and to other projects and careers in their life. For example, framing "hanging out with people (who happen to still use drugs)" as an action that is connected not only to the desired project of maintaining friendship but also to an undesired drug use project will suggest a potential strategy for change for the client who no longer wishes to be engaged in the latter project.

Furthermore, the way that career is framed within CAT leads to several additional implications for counselling. In the context of career counselling, practitioners working from this perspective will benefit from adopting a broad understanding of career that involves much more than occupation alone. Framing career as a longer-term, meaningful way of organizing action in relation to specific goals opens up space for an integrative, holistic approach to career counselling, encompassing the whole person. Indeed, Savickas (2011) has described taking a holistic approach where the client's life rather than occupational fit is the focus to be one of the key things that distinguishes career counselling from career guidance.

The possibility raised by CAT that presenting problems and psychological disorders may take on the status of a project or career in a client's life also provides suggestions for practice. To understand a client's 'depression career' or 'family conflict project' requires some assessment of the actions that are contributing to the maintenance of their problematic project or career, from the perspectives of manifest behavior, internal steering, controlling and regulating processes, and the meanings they have constructed about that project/career. Furthermore, if clients have been

engaged in such a project or career with other important members of their social context over time, knowing the purpose or goals of that problem career or project is also likely to be important. Understanding these goals may lead to ideas about how the same goal may be achieved in different, more functional ways, or to a renegotiation of goals that may lead to the construction of a new project or career to replace the problematic one. Finally, framing a client's presenting problem as a career or project carries with it an inherent suggestion that change is possible because in daily life, projects are understood as having an end-point and careers are understood as something that can be changed, albeit with difficulty and sometimes suffering.

### *Addressing Problems*

It is important to note that, in developing an understanding of the salient organizations and systems of action in a client's life, the counselor is not attempting to identify a "root cause" of the client's presenting problems. Indeed, seeking to isolate specific, direct causes contradicts CAT's ontological assumptions and emphasis on process and relationships rather than instrumental causality. Instead, it is assumed that assessing and conceptualizing the client's life in terms of the organization and systems of action leads to the identification of problems without having to isolate absolute causes (Young et al. 2011). These problem actions, projects and careers can then be addressed using specific interventions drawn from a range of different counselling approaches that fit the CAT conceptualization of the problem and the counselor's repertoire. Although Young et al. have suggested several specific interventions, at present the CAT approach to counselling integrates various techniques with a specific theory for understanding human action, lives and contexts. As illustrated by the case presented by Valach and Young (2012), the counselor can attempt to implement techniques from a range of sources, as long as the chosen technique is grounded in and consistent with understanding of the client's situation and context in terms of the organization and systems of action.

However, prior to selecting any intervention, it is necessary to develop goals that these interventions are designed to achieve. These goals should be consistent with the understanding of the problem developed through the task of identifying the organization and systems of action that are salient in the client's life. They should also be jointly negotiated by both the client and counselor. Goals are central to action within CAT, just as they are to many approaches to counselling. The theory further suggests that client and counselor should both be active participants in constructing these goals; that is, the goals of the counselling project should truly be joint goals rather than be purely client driven, or fully counselor directed. Indeed, previous research conducted on life projects in which parents and adolescents engage suggests that, when the goals primarily reflect the desires of one member of the dyad, the project is at greater risk for making little or no progress, or dissolving entirely. Specifically, when the goals for these projects primarily reflected the parent's desires and when adolescents acquiesced rather than contributed equally to their con-

struction, the adolescent's interest and engagement in the projects often diminished over time (Domene et al. 2011; Young et al. 2003). Although these studies were not about counselling per se, a clear implication of their findings is that it is important to have both members of a counselling dyad actively contribute to the development of counselling goals.

Several specific interventions have been described by contextual action theorists as having potential to address identified problems with client actions, projects or careers. Note that these interventions are not proscriptive in a CAT-informed approach to counselling, but are possible options that the counselor can use to address specific problems and pursue mutually negotiated goals. One such intervention, proposed by Young et al. (2011) in Chap. 14 of their book on the transition to adulthood, is a multi-session intervention for youth in transition. Directly paralleling their action project method of conducting research, this intervention involves (a) identifying desired projects for parents and adolescents to engage in together using conversations and video-assisted self reflection, that is, the "self-confrontation procedure"; (b) meeting with the clients individually or together to address ways to achieve specific aspects of the identified joint project; (c) using self-report journals and telephone sessions to monitor the clients' progress towards their desired project over a medial length of time, such as 6 months, accompanied by occasional individual sessions to address specific aspects of the project that emerge as requiring counselor assistance; and (d) a follow-up session, similar in format to the first one, designed to assess what has been accomplished over the course of the clients' counselling involvement, and to promote ongoing positive change in the future. To date, however, evidence for this proposed intervention is only beginning to be generated (e.g., Maillart and Michel 2009)

Another specific intervention that has been proposed by Young and colleagues is the a process of video-assisted self-reflection that has been labeled the "self-confrontation procedure." Originally developed as a way for researchers to access the internal process and social meaning dimensions of participants' actions, the self-confrontation procedure has been found to have potential as a counselling intervention (Popadiuk et al. 2008; Valach et al. 2002a). Not only can the procedure assist the counselor and client to understand the video-recorded action more fully, but the process of participating in the procedure can also benefit to the client in several ways (Young et al. 2011). Specifically, it can help clients to perceive themselves as the authors of their life narratives and, consequently, increase their sense of agency. The intervention also provides clients with an opportunity to step outside themselves as a help-seeker, in order to actively reflect upon their actions. This, in turn, can lead to greater awareness of the processes they are engaged in, as well as greater self-realization. Being asked to describe their internal cognitive and emotional processes may also lead clients to realize that their internal experience is not readily apparent to people around them, which may be a new experience for them. Finally, Young and colleagues suggest that the self-confrontation procedure may also be one way to address emotions and emotional memories that arise in counselling, which is another central task in CAT-informed counselling.

### ***Addressing Emotion/Emotional Memory***

In CAT, it is proposed that one of the functions of emotion is to energize action (Young et al. 1997); a person's emotional experience is an important motivating force in his or her life. For example, anger can drive a client to distance himself from his romantic partner, or to engage in persistent efforts to dominate and convince that partner of the correctness of his own position in a conversation. Similarly, the feelings of hope and anticipated joy may sustain a client's efforts to continue applying to a particular post-secondary education program, despite previous failures. By energizing people to take and maintain an action, emotion can either facilitate or interfere with goals in daily life and in counselling, depending on the nature of the action that an individual is driven to take. This conceptualization of emotion suggests that there is a need to attend to the client's emotions in counselling, not only as an end in itself, but because emotions can influence other aspects of their actions.

As previously explained, along with its energizing function, emotion is one of the key internal processes that serve a steering, controlling and regulating function within action. As such, emotion can be harnessed as part of the therapeutic task of addressing specific presenting problems, but it can also interfere with clients' progress towards goals, if their emotional experience or emotional memories emerge in an overwhelming way within the session or steers them to act in their daily lives in a way that contributes to their difficulties. For this reason, it is important to directly work with emotions in counselling, even in counselling contexts where it is typically ignored, such as vocational/occupational counselling (Young et al. 2011). Note that the therapeutic task of addressing emotion in CAT-informed counselling goes beyond eliminating disturbing emotion to encompass using the client's emotional experience to steer the client towards more life-enhancing action. Valach and Young (2012) further define this therapeutic task as including two aspects. The first aspect is facilitating competency in emotional processing, that is, for the client to be able to differentiate his or her own emotions and regulate their influence on the other dimensions of action. The second aspect is to identify and work with any negative emotional memories that are intruding on a client's functioning in daily life.

Consistent with its integrative approach to technique, a CAT-informed counselor is free to select from a wide range specific strategies, as long as the chosen set of interventions are consistent with an action-theoretical conceptualization of what is occurring for the client and accomplish both parts of this therapeutic task. Furthermore, given the energizing function of emotions and the fact that emotions, along with cognitions, are conceptualized as the primary steering processes for action. When a client or counselor experiences a sense of being 'stuck' in therapy, CAT suggests that it may be beneficial to explore what is occurring within and around the emotion as possible sources of the impasse in counselling. Could it be that the client or the counselor is no longer feeling the same intensity of emotions as previously and, thus, is no longer energized to engage in the counselling process? Could it be that the emotions being experienced by client or counselor, or his underlying cognition about the project have shifted to steer his action in a different direction;

that of disengagement from the goals that were previously negotiated? For example, if after several sessions a client develops the belief that she is incapable of change, or a client's emotional distress levels are reduced to the point that he is no longer bothered by the same circumstances that brought him into counselling, that client may no longer be interested in pursuing the counselling project. If the need occurs to reflect on these steering processes, the counselor could take the initiative to explore the client's internal processes in a subsequent session, and can seek assistance from a supervisor or colleague to explore what is occurring emotionally and cognitively for the counselor. These explorations would be focused on how the client's (or counselor's) emotional and cognitive reactions may be contributing to a problem for steering or energizing their actions in sessions.

### *Connecting with Daily Life*

A final task that must be accomplished is for the counselor and client to make connections between what occurs in counselling and the client's daily life. This includes attending to the background context and experiences that the client was engaged prior to entering counselling, and linking what has occurred in counselling with the actions, project, and careers that the client will pursue in the future (Young et al. 2011). Ultimately, without a connection between what happens in the therapeutic encounter and the client's past and future actions, projects, and careers, counselling is likely to be of limited long-term benefit to the person.

As with the other four key tasks of a CAT-informed approach to counselling, this therapeutic task is important throughout the counselling process and fully intertwined with the other tasks. In the task of conceptualizing the client's situation in terms of the organization and systems of action, it is important to consider the client's actions not only during the therapeutic encounter but also the actions that they described as experiencing prior to entering counselling. This is achieved by engaging in the task of connecting counselling with daily life at the same time as engaging in the task of conceptualizing what is occurring for the client. In a similar way, the tasks of addressing problems and addressing emotions/emotional memory will be of limited benefit if what is occurring in counselling is not connected to the client's life outside of therapy. It is the counselor's responsibility to assess whether these connections are being made, and to take the time to focus on making these connections if it is determined that efforts to address problems and emotion are not leading to changes outside of sessions. Finally, the primary way of making these connections that has been proposed by contextual action theorists is one that is naturally conducive to developing and maintaining an effective working alliance.

Young and colleagues (Valach and Young 2012; Young et al. 2011) proposed that the primary way to achieve the task of connecting counselling to clients' lives is to provide space for clients to construct narratives of their experience in a way that preserves their own frame of reference. Narratives have sequence, consequence, and movement (Reissman and Quinney 2005) and narratives about the client's life

usually cast the client as a protagonist or agent, even in cases where the client may not feel that they have much power or control over their circumstance. In this way, narratives tend to be descriptions of the client's actions in their life and, as such, provide a link between between the therapeutic encounter and that daily life (Young et al. 2011).

Some clients need little prompting to share their construction of what brought them to counselling or how their presenting problem came about. In this case, the counselor's primary role is to refrain from interfering with the client's presentation of his or her narrative. In some cases in which clients are reluctant to share their narratives, two techniques may be considered: (a) Use more active questioning during the session in a way that continues to invite the client to provide their own structure and identify for themselves what is an important part of the narrative. (b) Assign a homework exercise where the client is explicitly invited to construct a life history in a written format (e.g., Cochran 1997; Harrington and Hall 2007; Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey 2009). In a similar way, toward the conclusion of counselling, links can be made between what has occurred in session and the client's future life by directly asking the client to describe how they will maintain the changes they have achieved or continue to pursue positive projects in their life in the future or, again by inviting clients to write the next chapter in their life story.

Young et al. (2011) have also noted that it is often counterproductive for the counselor to direct the sequence of information sharing or to impose a structure on the narrative that is not the client's own, for example, by using a structured interview format to obtain the details that the counselor believes to be important. Furthermore, although the counselor is engaged in conceptualizing the client's experiences in terms of action, this task is achieved by the counselor entering into the joint goal-directed processes described by the client, not by forcing the client to adopt the counselor's framework. For example, in selecting an intervention, it is important to select ones that fit what the client understands to be the problem, rather than to engage in psychoeducation to convince the client of what is "really" going on as a precursor to introducing an intervention that addresses something that the client does not see as an issue. Ultimately, CAT-informed counselors recognize that narrative is by no means the only way to connect what occurs in counselling to clients' daily lives. It is, however, a convenient and consistent way to accomplish this therapeutic task.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented a framework for counselling that is explicitly informed by CAT. There are many areas of overlap with the frameworks presented in other chapters in this volume. However, what is distinct about our approach is not only the way in which action is defined, that is in goal-directed terms, but also the identification of a framework for counselling, that is, the five central therapeutic tasks described in the previous section. These distinctives are derived directly

from a contextual action understanding of action in human lives. However, some caution needs to be taken in adopting this framework as one's primary therapeutic approach: Systematic examination of the use of CAT to guide counselling is only beginning to emerge. Interventions that are unique to CAT have, thus far, received little empirical examination, though there are studies such as Michel and Valach (2001) and Maillart and Michel (2009) work on suicidal adults and Valach and Young's (2012) case study of a woman presenting with multiple issues.

Instead, the strength of the CAT approach to counselling is that it is grounded in a systematic way of understanding human action in daily life and in counselling sessions. As such it provides a way to conceptually integrate a wide range of specific interventions, many of which have received substantial empirical support, into counselling practice. Using specific interventions within this particular overarching framework does not negate the existing body of research on the effectiveness of an intervention, even if that evidence was originally generated within other theoretical frameworks. The chapters in the second half of this volume illustrate the potential benefit of using CAT to guide counselors' understanding of a wide variety client groups, presenting problems, and therapeutic modalities. As will become evident in these chapters, CAT can readily be used to develop and understanding of what is occurring and to systematically apply specific interventions to address what is occurring, even though many of those interventions were originally developed within other counselling theories.

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# Chapter 10

## Current Counseling Issues from the Perspective of Contextual Action Theory

Ladislav Valach, Richard A. Young and José F. Domene

Counseling is first and foremost a practice in which counselors and clients address, respond to, and construct a host of life circumstances, behaviors, narratives, emotions, cognitions, goals, intentions, identities, and many other phenomena. Counselors use pre-existing theories and explanations to address these phenomena. They also construct their own ad hoc explanations of them. For some, more elaborate articulated explanations emerge, for others the explanations they rely on are more implicit. Of particular influence in current counseling discourse are the issues addressed in Chaps. 2–8 of this book, that is, relation, construction, narrative, identity, values, intentionality, and emotion. We maintain that how counselors think about these issues is important for practice. Each of the authors of the aforementioned chapters suggested a way to conceptualize these issues within counseling. In addition, in Chap. 9, we proposed contextual action theory as an integrative and comprehensive approach to how counselors can conceptualize both their own work and the actions clients take in their lives. In this chapter, we address how contextual action theory addresses the major issues raised in Chaps. 2–8 by identifying the links and differences with what each author proposed and contextual action theory and discussing their implications for counseling practice.

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## The Relational Issue

The relational view of counseling as articulated by Flum in Chap. 7 and represented in the view of others (Blustein et al. 2004; Schultheiss 2003, 2007) suggests that relationships are central to human functioning, and thus important in counseling as both process and content. These authors point to and in places explicitly describe a relational ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Flum identified important links to contextual action theory in how intertwined projects and career are socially and culturally constructed jointly and communally.

The place of relationship in counseling is well represented in contextual action theory. In some ways, relation is core to understanding action and distinguishes contextual action theory from other conceptual frameworks. The place of relationship is more than claiming it is important. It is a way of defining action. We identify the sources of the relational view in contextual action theory and address its ontological, epistemological, and ethical relevance for counseling.

### *Sources of Understanding Relation and Action*

As a departure from previous understandings of career, Young (1984) maintained that considering career as vocation allowed it to be seen from the perspective of a self-other relationship. He did not limit that relationship only to an interpersonal one. It included the relationship between the personal and the environment, as for example, between a musician and her music. This view pointed to the possibility of the counselor and client looking at the meaning of action as a self-other relationship rather than as a manifestation of personality characteristics or organizational/institutional routes and expectations. Indeed, it was in reaction to the limitations of personality psychology in explaining behavior, as well as under the influence of ecological (Schoggen 1989) and environmental psychology (Stokols and Altman 1987), that the conception of action as relational was developed and elaborated (Austin and Vancouver 1996; Frese and Sabini 1991; Gollwitzer and Bargh 1996; Hacker 1994; Morsella et al. 2009; von Cranach et al. 1982; von Cranach and Harré 1982). Action was not considered as the behavioral externalization of personality and other structures, such as for example, physiological structures. Rather, a relational understanding of the processes between person and environment suggests constructing oneself and the environment through action. This proposition was later confirmed in the neurological research describing the brain as a relational organ (Fuchs 2008; Northoff 2009).

A third source of the relational perspective of contextual action theory is found in the conception of group action (von Cranach et al. 1986), which postulated the notion of joint action and the primacy of group action over group structure. This theory suggested that joint tasks lead to structure, and not vice-versa. Group action—the relational process—molds and impacts the group structure. The notion of relation in contextual action theory has also been influenced by research on the

working alliance (Horvath and Greenberg 1994). The working alliance represents on-going joint action of client and counselor, that is, relational joint action. It also parallels other joint actions and projects in clients' lives.

### ***Relational Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics***

Counseling that is informed by action theory also addresses fundamental relational issues raised in the literature, that is, relational ontology (Metzinger and Gallese 2003; Slife 2004), epistemology (Thayer-Bacon 1997; Dachler and Hoskin 1995; Emirbayer 1997), and ethics (Cottone 2004). While these issues may seem too philosophical, they nevertheless need to be attended to if we want to bridge the gaps among theory, research, and practice. Many counselors see their work as more of an art form than as science because they are often confronted with theories and research based on classical mechanics, which do not capture joint human action. A theory based on a relational ontology, epistemology, and ethics allows researchers to address the fluid, relational, and meaningful features of counseling.

Relational epistemology reminds us that it is not the copy of the objects "in there" that qualifies as the epistemological process, but the relationship within the process of gaining knowledge, the relationship in inquiry, the "what happens between those involved" in the epistemological process traditionally seen as subject and object (Gergen 1994). Thus, gaining knowledge is not mirroring the reality of objects but a relational process between inquirer and respondent. This relationship is specified in contextual action theory in the postulate that gaining knowledge happens in relational processes, that is, in actions. Both counselors and researchers utilize the actors' social meaning and the conceptual frame of reference dearest to them, that is, their naive action theory. The researcher, who is a systematic observer of the target process, is asked to employ socially meaningful conceptualizations next to functionally and physically defined observational units. These socially meaningful observational units are based on the everyday action theory or naive action theory of the concerned actors.

The issue of relational ethics is of immediate consequence for counseling. Relational ethics stresses the importance of seeing people as interdependent and active agents who consider, value, and further develop the relational "space-in-between" as the field of ethical action (Bergum and Dossetor 2005). In contextual action theory, the relational ethics of close relationships is emphasized. The roles of caring, connectedness, loyalty, guilt, fairness, accountability, and trustworthiness, stressed in the relational ethics, are relevant in contextual action theory. It sees relational ethics as being based on relationships with concrete consequences, as distinct from abstract or "value" ethics. In much of traditional philosophy, ontology and epistemology precede ethics because the latter is seen as an application of the principles of these areas. In naive action theory, the order is reversed because we begin with relational action. Relational ethics rather than ontology and epistemology is the first driver of our naive understanding of action.

In summary, contextual action theory captures important relational perspectives in its ontology, epistemology, and ethics. It sees most action as joint, and the meaning of action emerging from the self-other relationship. The connection to counseling is immediately obvious: counseling is a relational action.

## The Constructionism Issue

Once occupational futures were freed from the determinism of personal traits fitting different professions and when counseling reached beyond making the person-job fit meaningful, a different conceptualization of these domains was required. The active image of the person as well as constructionist postulates were the most influential contributions to the paradigm shift in understanding career and counseling (Collin and Young 1986, 2000; Savickas 2002). Savickas (2011), in his social analyses of the vocational world and counseling, described the changes both in working lives in the last 200 years and in the counseling profession. These analyses provided the basis for new approaches to these fields. In life designing and career construction, Savickas et al. (2009), from six European countries, outlined a conception of counseling incorporating the principles of constructionism (Young and Collin 2004) not only for counseling but also for development in the world of work. Although constructionism figures largely in their approach, it is not the epistemological constructivism that suggests “anything goes” in research based on the assumptions that any empirical method is a construction and any “reality” it uncovers is itself a construction of the method (Glaserfeld 1987).

Instead, Savickas et al. lean toward the “author’s” narrative construction and the social construction of reality rooted in the views of Berger and Luckman (1966), Wittgenstein (1953/2001), and Vygotsky (1978). Contextual action theory shares this view. We describe the constructionist propositions adopted by action theory by stressing the constructive properties of action and projects through which people construct the world, including counselors helping clients to construct their lives and design their vocational participation (Young and Valach 2004). In addition, the action-project method tackles epistemological constructionism by including all possible methodological means, that is, systematic observation (professional constructions in terms of manifest processes), naïve observation (everyday construction in terms of social meaning), and subjective experience (the self-confrontation interview which uses subjective reports) (Valach et al. 2002; Young et al. 2005).

Savickas (2011) provided an orderly and systematic narrative about the development of counseling as a profession in order to explain the constructionist approach. He stipulated the characteristics of vocational guidance, career education, and career counseling as follows: vocational guidance is characterized by object, self-matching, actor, trait, and resemblance, career education is characterized by subject, self-implementing, agent, tasks, and reactivity, and, finally, career counseling is characterized by project, self-making, author, themes, and reflexivity. Thus, he indicated that these three approaches employ different philosophies by distinguishing

among object, subject, and project or among resemblance, reactivity, and reflexivity. Contextual action theory works with a systemic order of the action/project/career organization distinguishing among the top action or goal level of steering and socially meaningful categorizing, the level of the action steps where the control processes are described by functional categories, and the level of action elements where the action regulation is addressed in physical terms. This applies to the system of action, project, and career alike. Consequently, in addressing these three different types of observational units, contextual action theory accounts for the three different philosophies stipulated in Savickas' distinction between vocational guidance, career education, and career counseling and, thus, can utilize the strengths of each of these approaches.

In summary, the integration and extent of constructionism in contextual action theory is particularly evident in its conceptual framework and research method. Specifically, it integrates the how professionals construct action by attending to manifest behavior, how participants construct their own actions by attending to their internal processes, and how the community constructs action by attending to the naïve observation of the communication community.

## The Narrative Issue

As Savickas (this volume) suggested, constructionist approaches in counseling rely to a large degree on narratives. With the counselor's help, the client develops a narrative to work with in counseling. Moreover, the aim of counseling is to develop and settle on a narrative in which both the past is accepted and clients see themselves as playing an active part in their future. The use of narrative in counseling is based on research findings and assumptions about the role of narratives in counseling and in life in general, for example, meaningful and agentic narratives (Adler 2012; Woike and Polo 2001), narratives of self-growth (Lilgendahl and McAdams 2011). Working with client narratives is an important part in any counseling approach in order to develop and establish the working alliance or, generally, a good relationship. Giving the floor to clients to develop their narratives means showing them respect and recognition. It allows clients to present themselves in a way that is compatible with their identity projects and thereby can involve counselors in facilitating these projects. Engaging in narratives helps clients approach emotionally anchored traumatic experiences that may overshadow present actions and restrict work on their futures. Thus, narrative is an important tool through which counselors can recognize the emotional underpinning of some of the client's life experiences that need to be addressed and worked on in counseling. Although the informative value of narratives might be limited in moments when clients are talking about some actions with unconscious connection to their projects (Dyer et al. 2010), they, nevertheless, are indispensable for representing actions in counseling and also as steering cognitions for clients future actions and projects (Gollwitzer 1993, 1996, 1999; Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006).

The narrative issue has also turned counselors' attention to the phenomenological approach to research (Polkinghorne 1989, 2005; van Manen 1990; Wertz 2005), counseling (Bloom 2009; Bradford 2009; Felder and Robbins 2011; Hersch 2011), and understanding self (Bayne and Levy 2006), and others (Merleau-Ponty 1982–1983). It also turned their attention to common sense thinking and everyday action theory (Heider 1958; Vallacher and Wegner 1987). Contextual action theory informed counseling integrates the use of narratives in several ways, but its relationship to the relevance of narratives is complex. Clients are given the floor to develop their narratives (Valach et al. 2010; Michel and Valach 2010). But it is important to ensure that counselors and clients create and maintain an action-oriented language in their narratives in and about the counseling encounter (Schafer 1976). The narrative is the fabric of the client's actions and projects and also the path to their emotions. However, the narrative is not the exclusive and direct gate to the ongoing projects and actions. The counselor cannot work with the text of the narrative alone, but has to rely on the observation of how the person's narrates, that is, the action of narration. Thus, to narrate something is an action process and the content of the narratives are also actions. However, the content of the narratives and the actions on which the narrative focuses are not identical. The self-confrontation interview teaches us that the narratives are not even identical with the subjective experiential form of the target actions.

Counseling informed by contextual action theory employs the elements of the action-project research method to access client projects by focusing on the actions clients engage in, that is, their performed actions (Gysin-Maillard and Michel 2013). Counselors can record the client's life relevant narratives in conversations with relevant others, such as the conversations of adolescents with their parents or peers, and of counselors and their clients. Counselors can use these recorded actions to understand more fully what is going on in the client's narrative driven conversations in terms of manifest processes, subjective processes, and social meaning. Systematic observation of manifest processes either in vivo or of the video recorded individual and joint actions provides information on manifest processes. The self-confrontation interview, which can be used in counseling, adds information to the systematic observation on the client's internal cognitive–emotional processes. In addition, the narrative of naïve observers, in this case the client, provides valuable information on the social meaning of the ongoing processes. It is the entry into the understanding of the client's specific culture and protects practitioners from being culturally blind and making universal assumptions. These procedures are an ideal means of accessing the client's relevant actions and projects in counseling, which is not always the case in everyday counseling practice.

Some of the aforesaid data identified can be assumed as known and the corresponding method omitted. For example, when counselors are rooted in the same communication community as the clients, they might omit the naïve observation procedure. If the counselor can request the client's thoughts and emotion at the moment of their reporting on a relevant issue without interrupting their stream of thoughts and narrative, the counselor might omit the self-confrontation interview. If the counselor is experienced enough to make key observations of the important



actions at all relevant levels, counselor might omit the systematic observation procedure. However, the counselor is well advised to keep this ideal set of methods of accessing the relevant projects in mind. In addition, the regular monitoring of the client's relevant project, which is a part of the action–project research method as well, is an important part of counseling contributes to facilitating this project. Finally, by basing counseling and research on comparable information gathering procedures contextual action theory bridges the research and counseling practice gap (Young and Domene 2012).

Contextual action theory adds to recent work on narrative by pointing to and unpacking its complexity. Narrative is not simply an end product, it itself is a process. It needs to be attended to in counseling, but its dynamic and intricate characteristics can be accounted for through the aforesaid procedures, such as facilitating the telling of the narrative, keeping its focus on internal and manifest action, and accessing the action of narrating through the use of the self-confrontation interview.

## Identity and Self-construction Issues

McAdams (1996, 2001) suggested that constructing a narrative identity provides a sense of purpose and meaning as well as a sense of unity across time and situations. Thus, narratives, goal-directed actions and projects, and identity construction are closely related. Counseling informed by contextual action theory underlines the importance of ongoing identity projects (Marshall et al. 2006). These identity projects are mostly interwoven with other projects, such as occupational and career projects (Young et al. 2001). As we have seen earlier in this book, Guichard's research and theorizing also deals with this important segment of vocational life: self-construction (Collin and Guichard 2011; Guichard this volume, 2005, 2009). He maintains that self is constructed in context and through relationships; that it is produced discursively. In dialogue and other forms of joint action, the self is constructed through narrative. Self-construction is a continuous, dynamic, and reflexive process from which the self emerges but is never complete (Collin and Guichard 2011). Self-construction implies, but is not limited to, the involvement of occupational activities (Guichard and Dumora 2008).

The self-construction Guichard envisions seems similar to what is presented in contextual action theory, and in many ways it is. For example, both take a constructivist perspective. Where they differ is that Guichard's self-constructionism may have arisen from identity theories formulated around notions of external activity and internal adaptation, a kind of dualism between the inner and outer. In contrast, contextual action theory considers self-construction as an action (and as a project and career). Dualism is abandoned in favor of the action, which constructs the self. Self-construction is an action process.

Counseling informed by contextual action theory attends to the process of self-construction in a number of ways. First, in the very first encounter with their clients, as well as through the entire counseling process, counselors attend to and respect

the ongoing identity and self-construction projects. Such attention and respect are eminently important for establishing a joint project in counseling. The counselor has to contribute to the client's identity project as soon as possible to become accepted by the client in the project for which he or she sought the counselor's support. Thus, not only has the counselor to communicate, "I am going to help by contributing to the resolution of your problem", but also "I am going to help in supporting your identity project and developing it further." The simple question to answer and integrate in the counselor's action is "how does the client want to be seen?" For example, although a client may present herself as a shy person and might even like to be seen as such in order to invite encouragement, the counselor may reframe the client's statement as follows: "I see, you are someone who does not like to impose on anyone." This skill of mirroring clients' identity goals to them is an important part of the working alliance in counseling, when we consider that the working alliance is more than having a good relationship.

Second, as counseling informed by contextual action theory underlines the importance of joint actions and projects for facilitating self- and identity construction, the counselor's task is to support and help enfold such actions, joint actions and projects. In general, this means that clients cannot develop a proactive self through counseling sessions in which they play only a passive role. For some clients, engaging in the relationship with the counselor as a proactive person may be a new relational experience, unlike other relationships they have had in their daily lives. Thus, clients' self-constructions can be realized in counseling by engaging in self-constructing action and projects within counseling itself. This proposition is also central to the relational approaches to counseling and psychotherapy: to provide a new relationship experience, that is, the experience of joint action and joint project in counseling, leading to clients' lives that facilitate self-construction.

Third, self-construction of the person's identity occurs in a number of identity-related projects, some of which might be "life detrimental" or otherwise destructive for the person. Consequently, counselors not only deal with and support "life facilitating and enhancing" self-constructions, but also help clients become aware of and reframe "life detrimental and destructive" identity-related projects. "I am not talented," "I don't have a chance," "I am someone who cannot take failure," "I can't do it" are some statements that can be indicative of a detrimental self-construction.

Fourth, Guichard and Dumora (2008) point to the importance of recognizing the links between cognitive identity frames and group belongingness. They suggest that the categories that describe various groups, for example, "women, retired, Belgian, punk" (p. 195) can play a major role in self-construction. Contextual action theory agrees. It is essential that clients relate individual identity to group identity. In the process of self-construction, it is equally important for clients to link their actions to their projects. This identification can be facilitated in counseling by dealing with the issue of "which actions belong to which projects" and vice versa. In this process, the client's self-construction becomes informed, differentiated and coherent.

Fifth, Guichard (2003, 2005; Guichard and Lenz 2005) posits self-construction as a complementary process to career construction in the process of life designing. That is, self-construction and career construction are concurrent processes in the

life designing conceptualization. This view partly reflects the dualistic conception of human behavior in which the distinction is made between external behavior and internal adaptation. Dialectic behavioral therapy (DBT) also postulates a dialectic relationship between stabilizing the inner balance and the pressure to learn new behavior strategies (Linehan 1987; Linehan et al. 2006). That relationship can be experienced as pressure to show the required behavior, on the one hand, and experiencing identity “soothing” interventions, on the other. DBT offers another way to deal with this issue that emphasizes the conflict between the internal and external. In contrast, contextual action theory emphasizes processes of self- and career construction, rather than the external and internal adaptation process. It sees identity and self-construction projects not in a complementary relationship to career construction but as an integral part of other projects and career. It also does not see self-construction in conflict with other projects, as DBT might suggest. Rather, contextual action theory assumes a possible synergic system organization.

Finally, contextual action theory suggests that self-construction occurs in actions and projects. Self-construction is not just self-consideration or abstract thinking about self. It is also “doing”, enacting (Stewart 2010) and experiencing, enclosing a process also addressed in the mindfulness school (Hayes 2004; Siegel 2010). These actions and projects are systemically organized, as discussed in the previous chapter. This organization of action allows their systematic study, detailed monitoring, and focused intervention in the “here and now.”

Contextual action theory takes a decidedly “action” perspective on the process of self-construction. By attending to and supporting self-construction projects, by recognizing their possible life detrimental as well as life enhancing aspects, and by affirming their relation to group belongingness, counselors can use contextual action theory explicitly in the self-construction process.

## The Systems Issue

The recognition of the complexity of career development and counseling within the multiple contexts that surround an individual’s life led to the application of systems theory in these domains (Collin 1990). Patton et al. extensively applied systems theory to career counseling (Patton 2007; Patton and McMahon 1999, 2006a, b; McMahon et al. 2005a, b). Patton (this volume) identified her view of both the common ground and the differences between her Systems Theory Framework (STF) and contextual action theory. One important difference between them is that in STF, the system is identified as a person, a social system, or any other personal or social unit. Contextual action theory takes a more restricted view, maintaining that a system is identified as an individual or joint action, project, or career. Thus, we see the systemic process, rather than the systemic “structure,” as a unit of interest in both research and practice. Our focus is not a person who is doing something within a particular environment. Rather it is an action by which the person and the environment are constructed, that is, changed. Action is a relational concept of

person and environment. It marks the beginning of the analysis and explanation of further processes. Thus, if we want to understand a client's situation, we study the action. Action is neither simply the manifest behavior, the subjective definition of goal nor the social attribution of an action. Rather, it is a combination of these three views. Additionally, actions are almost never individual. They are mostly joint actions. Thus, actions are understood as two systems simultaneously. One system is the individual action or action processes. The other system the joint action or action processes (von Cranach et al. 1986; Valach et al. 2002). This understanding of action as a twofold system is captured in counseling when counselors ask themselves the questions: "what am I doing?", "what are we doing?", and "how do they fit or relate?" Furthermore, most actions of importance to clients are embedded in projects, which, in turn, are part of various long-term processes, often seen as career.

The systemic nature of action can have a strong influence on the empirical study of action processes, on the understanding of everyday life, and on counseling process and strategies. Briefly, we have posited that (1) action, project, and career are conceived of as a systemic order, (2) action, project, and career are described as being related to each other in a systemic order, and (3) in analyzing and engaging in them we have to follow the principles of this systemic organization. These propositions have real consequences for counseling. First, counselors have to act in a way that fits their clients' joint project and targeted goals. Second, they further have to ensure that their actions not only serve the client's primary project, such as vocational clarification, but also other relevant projects, particularly the identity and emotional projects. Finally, the systemic understanding of action allows counselors to distinguish among its different levels and ways it is organized. These distinctions, in turn, suggest different interventions (see Chap. 19 for full discussion of counseling procedures based on contextual action that reflect system theory propositions).

## The Human Values Issue

One response to the lively theoretical and methodological developments in counseling in the past few decades (Blustein et al. 2004; Young and Domene 2012) has been the increase in more integrative approaches (Lent et al. 1994; Patton 2007; Patton and McMahon 2006a, b; Savickas 2011). These approaches are in contrast to the "single proposition" schools (see reviews in Brown 2003; Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey 2005 for career counseling; Prochaska and Norcross 2010 for psychotherapy). Savickas (2011, 2013) represents this integrative approach in developing a counseling procedure and conceptualization for the new millennium. He incorporated a number of innovations agreed to by counselors from various countries and cultures, thereby creating a common denominator for counseling. Patton et al. (Patton 2007; Patton and McMahon 1999, 2006a, b; McMahon et al. 2005a, b) provided a conceptual systemic frame of reference that accommodates many of the recent innovations in counseling theory, research, and practice. Another attempt to enrich and integrate developments in counseling of the last 20 years can be found in Richardson's work (1993, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2012). While Savickas's approach is based on the

desire for an integrated counseling practice and Patton and McMahon's integration is conceptually driven, Richardson's work is very much rooted in the desire for the integration of value systems based on her understanding of, and response to, current social changes.

Concerned about the state of counseling psychology in the 1980s, Richardson (1993) highlighted not only how its conceptual development lagged but also how it was embedded in White, middle class, and male standards of vocational life. Richardson's discussion was a call for updating these antiquated views. Her call can also be understood as an appeal for counseling interventions driven by the humanistic values of equality, empowerment, and compassion that her conceptual propositions reflect.

Richardson (1993) proposed replacing the study of career with the study of work in people's lives, using a constructionist epistemology and the stance of applied psychology. She defined one of the goals of applied psychology as a commitment to "facilitating the development and enhancing the well being of individuals who are clients as well as subjects or objects of inquiry" (p. 430). This call for a conceptualization of counseling psychology informed by humanistic values is well reflected in contextual action theory. The latter is thoroughly rooted in thinking that provides an alternative to the logical positivism and naïve realism Richardson deplored. In addition, the constructionist stance is an important pillar of contextual action theory. Furthermore, in understanding professional activity in terms of actions and projects, the constant aim is that the intervention has to be life enhancing for the clients and other participants. Thus, contextual action theory is neither value-free nor does it promote White, middle class, and male standards.

Contextual action theory takes up both an understanding of the term *career* implied by Richardson's work, and a value-based orientation. To briefly characterize the core of the meaning of the term *career*, we see it as attached to the generating of hope as a conviction that our everyday actions make sense because they are part of a more comprehensive continuity, to paraphrase Havel's (1990) definition:

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (p. 181)

In contextual action theory, *career* is not understood simply in an occupational sense, but rather as it is lived in everyday life. We distinguish among various ways the term is used, for example, in narratives (be it professional narratives, naïve observer narratives, or subjective narratives), or in the unfolding of action processes that reach beyond the dimensions of a project. Thus, we are able to conclude that in contextual action theory, career is understood based on the conventions, rules, and norms of the given communication community.

### ***Agency and Empowerment***

Richardson (1994a) pointed out that setting a counseling goal of client agency and empowerment might actually be disempowering because doing so assumes some people do not see themselves as agents or actors of their everyday life; that they do

not see themselves as engaged in daily life construction. Similarly, contextual action theory avoids this pitfall by not assuming that some people are, and some are not agents of their lives. Action, of which agency is a part, is rooted in an everyday understanding of human behavior and is valid for everyone while the behavior is unfolding. Action theory concepts, such as goal, steering, control, regulation, plans, strategies, all of which are related to agency, function in ongoing action. They do not depend on narratives about action or reflection on it. It may be that some people are more reflective about their sense of agency than others, but the basic understanding of agency applies to everyone. Reflecting on action is not the only way to optimize life facilitating and enhancing actions and projects.

Contextual action theory does not assume reactive behavior by some people and proactive behavior by others, based on group membership. For example, it does not assume that persons who work as laborers are disempowered by virtue of their membership in this occupational group. Rather, contextual action theory can work with approaches specific to each group. For example, naïve observation by members of the same communication community is one of the methods of contextual action theory, as evident in the study of First Nations people in Canadian cities (Marshall et al. 2011). The naïve action theory explicated in different occupational groups might differ in some aspects, but its roots are always experienced action, disregarding the reflective power of each occupational group. And this experienced action is, in most cases, understood as goal-directed.

The counseling process of helping clients recognize which actions and projects they participate in and with whom, what their function is, and whether these actions and projects are compatible with their life enhancing priorities. There is no doubt that clients are engaged in a series of actions and projects, though they might differ in their reflection on them. Thus, the counseling process should be independent of value judgments about the client's social class and other group memberships but it is embedded in social knowledge and culture.

It is easier to write about than engage in a counseling process that is independent of our value judgments about the groups from which clients originate or in which they are embedded. Often these values are so endemic in the context that we, as counselors, are often not aware of them.

Richardson (1994b) addressed the issue of agency and empowerment. In order to bypass the problem of the dualistic roots of considering individuals as having agency or not having it and thus in need of empowerment, she proposed the concept of embodied empowerment. Richardson suspected that previous concepts of agency might be too loaded with the Cartesian split between mind and body—a worry she solved later by addressing agency in processes of intentionality (Richardson 2004). Similarly, contextual action theory does not have the problem of the mind/body split and its impact on understanding agency. In contextual action theory, the self is not conceptualized *a priori*. Rather the self is constructed through identity projects, indicated by identity relevant actions and being a part of an identity development career—and is thus an empirical concept. The self is a process.

Richardson (2004) also addressed another key argument in the emergence of new intentions in subjective experience. Accepting that agentic behavior is important for psychological functioning and integrity, she proposed a relational and constructionist

understanding of human action in its social as well as personal form. Contextual action theory is compatible with this proposition. The frequently discussed dilemma of personal versus social constructionism is bypassed in the conception of joint action in which individual and social construction through action is seen as a two-level systemic process. Equally, the problem of agency is conceptualized from a different perspective as we see the action and not the person as the primary focus and unit of analysis in research. Thus, the issue of whether the construct of agency is feasible and whether it can be considered as a cause of behavior are no longer the primary questions. We assume that individual and social responsibilities are important values in many cultures, and perhaps throughout our evolutionary history. Thus, the concept of agency is an important goal of individual and social construction.

Sometimes intentions for action do not translate well into action, for example, not to light the next cigarette when quitting smoking, to abstain from drugs, or to exercise more. In moments when intentions do not translate well into action, one does not rely on a discussion about the causal nature of the goal or intention per se but rather on engaging in goal-directed systems. For example, arranging with someone to go to the gym instead of going to the pub increases the probability that the person will not smoke or drink. The person is creating a context that facilitates the desired action. To think about our life and to organize our doings in a goal-directed way is constructing our life in (1) a cultural context that contains values of responsibility, striving and self determination, (2) in a natural context in which survival is better for those who act in a goal-directed manner. Further, through participation in these processes, we simultaneously help to construct these contexts

Action facilitating contexts are not exclusively individual ad hoc contexts but social and institutionalized contexts. Sometimes institutional cultural contexts change, as has happened in the past 30 years for organizational careers. Careers that were typically provided by organizations enabling an employee to stay with one firm and progress through the career ladder are no longer the common pattern. Consequently, Richardson (2009) proposed abandoning the career discourse in favor of discourse about work and to expand the counseling discourse into other life domains. Contextual action theory has taken up this challenge by loosening the close link between career and occupation. Specifically, it conceptualizes career as any long-term process of individual and joint goal-directed processes.

In summary, contextual action theory distinguishes *career* from *occupation*. It also provides *career* with a conceptual base by linking it to goal-directed human action and their mid-term projects. By doing so, contextual action theory addresses Richardson's concern with how values, agency, and empowerment are addressed in counseling and the place of work in people's lives.

## The Intentionality and Volition Issue

Intentionality and volition have had a mixed reception in counseling. Sometimes they have been neglected, often are taken for granted, at other times understood as rational decisions, but have also been doubted recently. Howard (1984) pointed out

that more attention should be paid to human action and proposed studies in which “much greater attention would be given to the plans, intentions, and so forth, of the person involved in the investigation (p. 440).” Richardson (2004) equally addresses and supports this proposition in a number of publications and particularly clarified the topic of new intentions as encountered in counseling. Most recently, Broonen (2010) reviewed the more than 30 years of research and writing on the issue of intention and action in psychology and particularly the processes involved in the problem of how intentions become actions. Broonen pointed out that the European tradition in thinking on intentionality, particularly in its theoretical conceptualization, is from the perspective of action. He singled out Gollwitzer’s approach (1993, 1996, 1999), which shares similar roots but has substantial differences with contextual action theory. In contextual action theory, the most relevant intention is the intention in action. Action goals are specific to an action and occur within an action. Considerations of goals (intention) outside of a particular action are not the goals of this action. Mid-term goals are project goals and have different properties than goals in actions. Equally, career goals are not comparable with action goals. Project and career goals can and must be explored through actions. Thus, the research methods for studying goals (Young et al. 2005) are very specific and designed to monitor the unfolding actions and projects. Questionnaires designed to collect information on goals are less feasible in contextual action theory, but common in other approaches, such as in Gollwitzer’s research (1993, 1996, 1999). To understand this difference is to understand that the goal in action in contextual action theory is not what we say we want to do tomorrow or next week but what we are doing now. What people report they are involved in this month or year, what they want to do this month or year, is one thing, but understanding their ongoing action and the projects of which this action is a part, is another. To understand ongoing action needs systematic, professional observation of the manifest processes, the naïve observation by the members of the specific communication community, and the self-confrontation interview providing information on the thoughts, feelings, and sensations during the actions. These three sets of information or data serve as a source for the description and understanding of ongoing action. In addition, these data sets also serve as information on projects and career of which this action is a part.

The relation between the intention of an action and the client’s projects and careers has substantial consequences for counseling. In some cases, clients may not find hypotheses about ongoing projects and career plausible. When they are not plausible to clients, additional processes may be needed to increase awareness and to test the plausibility of these hypotheses. For example, the counselor may perceive that a client procrastinates in order to protect client’s self-esteem, as the client is afraid of failure. In this case, the action of procrastination is framed by the counselor to be a part of the self-esteem protection project. However, the client may not find this hypothesis likely, as the client believes that procrastination is caused by factors beyond client’s intention and control. This kind of difference in perspective highlights the weakness of relying on verbal reporting about goals. Rather, counselors working from a contextual action theory perspective are encouraged to involve clients in action and learning about their adjoining projects and career, in order to



develop a joint or common understanding of the client's intention. In turn, clients may learn to perform actions appropriate for the projects and career they desire and intend to pursue. Alternatively, counselors may learn that their hypotheses are incorrect, at which point they would formulate alternative ideas concerning the intention behind a client's action.

The concepts of intentions and goal-directed actions apply, first of all for short-term action, in everyone except in persons with severe brain damage (Serino et al. 2010; Vallacher and Wegner 1985). However, how much these concepts are used to organize one's work and life is another issue. Here cultural conventions, rules, and norms apply; where individual and social differentiation can be found. These concepts are also safeguarded by mental health and illness definitions. The negative symptoms in schizophrenia and the compulsive thinking and behavior in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder are only a few examples of how much the "projection" of goal-directed action intentionality into projects and career are used to delineate the border between healthy, life-enhancing and ill, life-detrimental actions.

Some people misunderstand the distinction between goal-directed action as experienced and lived and as used in an interpretative frame. They maintain that as some clients or members of certain social groups do not organize their mid-term and long-term time spaces into units specified by the principles of an individual goal-directed action, that is, they do not construct these as projects and career. Thus, they suggest that the model of goal-directed action is obsolete (Smith 2005). This postulate is mistaken for two reasons. First, as Serino et al. (2010) explain, everyone engages in short-term goal-directed actions. Second, the lack of reflection on projects and career does not mean that the persons are not participating in projects and careers run by others; that is, joint processes about which these persons are not fully informed or not aware of in a reflective mode.

In summary, contextual action theory uses current conceptualizations and research on intentionality and volition in a way that highlights the intentionality of current actions as well as linking intentions to mid-term projects and long-term career, involving past, present, and future.

## The Culture Issue

Whether the society we live in or we personally, counselors and clients alike, adhere to the idea of multiculturalism, we are all confronted with different cultures. The issue of culture becomes a topic of reflection and discussion. Counselors are particularly challenged to deal with this issue as they very often work at the crossroads of cultures. Thus, counselors have to develop what are called cross-cultural competencies for multicultural counseling (Bledsoe and Owens 2011; Collins and Arthur 2010; Pedersen et al. 2008). Leong (2007) pointed out that the cultures of racial and ethnic minorities are one of three important dimensions in counseling, which he defined as the universal, the group, and the individual. He also provided a cultural accommodation model for counseling. Chen extensively addressed the issue of

multicultural and cross-cultural experience and counseling (1995a, b, 1998, 2004). He introduced the agentic concept (2002, 2006) for dealing with cross-cultural counseling and proposed a model of contextual multicultural counseling (CMC) (Stewart et al. 2008). In this theoretical development, the constructivist approach played an important role (Chen 2003). It helps in understanding that the way life is organized is primarily a cultural phenomenon rather than a phenomenon of nature. Thus, counseling is primarily a cultural practice. Further, it is now often recognized that counseling theories and practices are not based on acultural, natural laws but are non-universal, cultural processes.

Consistent with the work of the preceding authors, contextual action theory stresses the view of cultural actions, projects and careers (Young et al. 2011). Actors, individuals, and groups are seen as engaging in cultural actions, projects and careers rather than being impacted by external cultural variables or factors. Long-term cultural processes are mostly trans-generational. This view is heuristically helpful in studying or working with people in migration processes, as these are mostly trans-generational. Although they are not exclusively individual, they are very specific for the involved individuals and groups. These active processes are only partly covered by the term of acculturation (Berry 2002), which addresses changes occurring in the course of a learning process. Considering culture and acculturation in terms of goal-directed processes does not require the assumption of fully conscious purposefulness of cultural actions, projects, and careers. Substantial parts of actions, projects, and careers are not consciously represented. Further, as cultural processes are defined, again, as any other action processes, from three perspectives (systematic, naive, subjective), they do not rely exclusively on any one of these sources. Thus, cultural processes can include substantial discrepancies between self-experience and attributions by others, particularly attribution by different social groups. Consequently, to understand a client involved in a trans-generational cultural project of constructing for herself a cultural identity in a new country is not enough to know how “an immigrant from that country would think and behave” but also how this person or persons with similar attributes are seen by others, that is, by members of other communication communities in the new country. That is, what are the relations and relationships, the joint actions and projects this client experiences and participates in.

## The Emotion Issue

Emotional processes in counseling have a long and substantial history (Lewis et al. 2008; Nykliček et al. 2011). Greenberg et al. (Greenberg 2002; Greenberg et al. 1998) represent an important step in this development. Watson (also see Chap. 8) provided a substantial conceptual and empirical contribution to this approach (Cooper et al. 2010; Watson et al. 2007). Her research articles and case studies continue to represent a rich source of insights and information on emotion-focused therapy (Watson et al. *in press*; Geller et al. 2010; Watson 2010a, b).

Watson (Chap. 8) outlined a highly differentiated and well-reasoned approach to conceptualizing emotion and emotion focused intervention based on the monitoring function of emotion. She explained that problems in experiencing, processing, reflecting and understanding emotion can hinder action, self-growth, and particularly, relating to others. While Watson, conceptually and in psychotherapy, focuses directly on emotional processes, contextual action theory deals with emotion as it occurs in action. Watson also supports a close connection between emotion and action, particularly in the concept of emotion schema, which represents, among other things, the action tendency inherent in emotion. Emotion-focused theory strongly supports the relevance of reflecting on emotion, but it also relies on the enacting of emotion, on experiencing emotion within an action. With regard to the latter, the emotion-focused therapist engages in empty chair and two chair techniques (Greenberg and Webster 1982). Contextual action theory extends this proposition to recognize the role of emotional memory within specific actions, be it in a relational context, as a part of problem solving, or in an object-related action: although emotional memory or emotional schema is a relevant root of many maladaptive actions, resolving and reprocessing the key emotion will not automatically improve all the actions corroborated by this destructive emotion. Thus, working with the specific actions and the target emotion at the same time is necessary.

Emotion is not the sugar coating on the cake of action in contextual action theory. It is the fabric of action. It is there for action. Emotions are mostly active and required for the immediate holistic monitoring of current situations. However, they are equally related to mid-term projects and long-term career as these are materialized and embodied in ongoing actions. In addition, emotions can generate long-term emotional anticipation and carry past emotional experience to the present. For example, the expectation of positive outcomes and positive emotion at the end of a project or career is mirrored in the positive emotions of looking forward to the outcome during the ongoing action. Expectations of negative outcomes or emotions related to a project may be experienced as fear and anxiety in the current action. Expectations of conflicts are often answered in an emotional *cul de sac*, blockage, or de-energizing. Occasionally, the expectation of conflict results in the emotional energizing of a compulsive action detached from the goals of the project or career. Thus, a person may take action steps that are primarily related to minimizing anxiety, although less related to the project from which the anxiety stems.

Although contextual action theory sees actions as a systemic process in which both top-down and bottom-up steering co-occur, emotions are often described in current research and conceptual literature as bottom-up steering processes. This particularly is the case in the fight-flight response or what is understood as affective, impulsive behavior (Ochsner et al. 2009). Watson (Chap. 8) et al. (Larsen and Prizmic 2004) also described emotions as regulation processes. Contextual action theory shares this view when emotion is seen within an action that is steered from the top-down. It locates regulation processes at the lowest level of action organization and describes the regulation of action as proceeding by the quick processes of emotional monitoring of the elements of action. For example, movement mishaps accompanied by a negative feeling may lead to an attempt to correct the movement.

When regulation is thought of as changes in input (Powers 1989, 1992), emotions help people to perceive and experience action flow through generating changes in movement and voice according to the current goals, sub-goals, and the environmental conditions. Subconscious or unconscious regulation via emotion produces changes in behavior and action, which become conscious and are perceived. Emotional processes also facilitate the control processes at the middle level of action organization through the monitoring function. The evaluation of the action steps and the quick selection of the better or the “right” one are unthinkable without emotional involvement.

Emotions are also involved in the top-down steering process on their own. The emotional qualities of a goal are decisive for the way the goal is processed in an action, how the goal steers the action. For example, one of the main issues in depression is the person’s inability to generate interest and motivation for action, due to a lack of emotional engagement in the action at the goal level. At the control level of action, depression is experienced as an inability to decide or to evaluate an action step. At the level of action regulation, depressive action is experienced either as carelessly executed or overly perfectionist, as if the time and goal reference to the whole action were lost.

Emotions are often the goals of actions. Having fun and other positive experiences are widely shared goals. Striving for happiness is thought of as one of the most respectable goals, as indicated in the constitution of the United States. Emotion well integrated in action processes is regarded as being able to facilitate or inhibit our success in life in general, our relationships, and our health.

Young et al. (1997) described the role that emotions play in individuals’ internal processes and in the formulation of plans and goals. In contextual action theory, we argue that emotion also energizes action. We describe emotions as relational action tendencies. As such, they serve to establish, maintain, or disrupt relationships with the environment in the form of readiness for goal-directed action. Emotion has been conceptualized to play an important role in goal-directed action for a variety of functional processes, behavioral regulation, and the construction of social meaning (Valach et al. 2002). Specifically, emotion energizes, monitors, and steers the goal-directed processes of actions and projects. Wanting to be happy, contented, satisfied, or proud within an action, project, and career and striving toward these emotions are common, expected, and gratified in our culture. Integrating emotion-related action steps into goal-directed processes to address or generate desired emotions is also a general practice. These could be positive or even negative; for example, some people believe that “one has to suffer before enjoying the satisfaction of achievement.”

Regulating emotion within an action is often addressed in psychological research (James 2007). In some cases, there is an underlying assumption that emotion is generated in an automatic way and that individuals can only regulate emotions. However, regulation of emotion can be found as both occurring automatically as well as being socially generated. Thus, emotion is as much a physiological process as it is a social construction. Both are neurologically anchored or mirrored. Consequently, emotion can be controlled and steered, not only regulated. Emotion monitors, can be monitored, and also energizes action.

Being aware of one's own emotions is an important task for the client in counseling. Some clients complaining about back pain, for example, frequently show a lack of emotional monitoring over a long time span. Being aware of one's own emotions also helps in differentiating the basic fight-flight responses or the black or white emotional repertoire more finely. The result of such differentiation is a culturally enriched repertoire of a great number of emotions and feelings. In turn, the enriched repertoire assists people to shift more easily from negative or unpleasant to positive and action facilitating emotions. Additionally, and speaking in neurologically simplified terms, it assists in engaging neocortex processes in amygdala-driven responses from which a differentiated action can be launched, reaching beyond the fight-flight action repertoire.

Being able to nourish positive emotion is also a skill that can be promoted in counseling. The previously described process is an important precondition for encouraging positive emotions. Generating memories of emotionally positive actions requires flexibility, which is not available during the stress of an induced fight-flight reaction. Emotion is an ever-present process within action: it is part of generating, maintaining, pursuing, changing, and realizing goals. In contrast to many motivation theories which assume that understanding the occurring emotion provides enough understanding of the subsequent behavior, contextual action theory proposes that it is the action that has to be understood in order to understand the ongoing behavior. Contextual action theory does not separate cognition, emotion, physiological processes, social meaning, conscious and unconscious processes, and intentional stance. These are integral aspects of action.

Despite reports about universal recognition of basic emotions (Ekman and Friesen 1971), there is a wide range of social conventions, rules, and norms in defining, supporting, and sanctioning them. Similarly, the construction of emotion is rooted in shared beliefs, culture, and social representations. Contextual action theory recognizes the social nature of emotional processes in action as it considers the social perspective in describing action as equal to the other two ways of describing action: the subjective reports and the systematic observation of professionals.

The processing of certain goals and actions might be facilitated by some emotions, while inhibited by others. Thus, as individuals sometimes steer their action to achieve certain emotions, emotions also can be facilitative in steering of people's action. Emotional control and emotional feedback and feed forward processes are also important to consider. "I've got a good feeling about it" is an accepted exclamation about the emotional control of an action. Emotion as instrumental in action regulation is also a widely experienced phenomenon. Actions in which we are not emotionally invested might take less time to complete (rushing through) or more time to begin (procrastination) or to finish (lingering); we might be less persistent in carrying them out (easily discouraged); we might invest less energy in them (indifference); and we might omit certain movements and not generate the behavioral features that are associated with a good execution of the action (lacking precision, not caring enough).

Emotions also directly energize and de-energize action. As the energy of and/or in action takes different forms, energy is more than a physical term. The function of energizing can be followed at different levels of the aforesaid action

organization described. In counseling, clients express a lack of energy or vigor in a variety of ways. For example, clients may complain about indifference and about not being able to evaluate action and action step alternatives. They may grumble about having to decide about which way to go in an action or what would be the better action to take. These client responses may indicate emotional disengagement at the medium level of action organization, the level of action steps, control processes, and plans. “I don’t know what to do”, “I’m not interested in anything”, “my life does not make sense” are everyday language formulations of emotional withdrawal at a higher level of the action organization (goal level), of project and of a career or life.

### ***Emotion as a Social Process: Joint Emotion***

The role of emotion in goal-directed action extends to interactive processes. To phrase it colloquially, “my action is impacting the others’ emotion and action, and others’ emotions are impacting my action and emotion.” The interactive equivalent of individual emotion is an important process to consider. The concepts of shared (Park et al. 2008), collective (Smith and Crandell 1984), social (Livingstone et al. 2011), intergroup (Mackie et al. 2000), and group emotion (Druskat and Wolff 2001), share the notion of a supra individual process of a similar quality as individual emotion, but distributed or shared by several individuals contributing to a social unit. The social unit can range from a simple, one-time encounter to a socially organized group. Contextual action theory also addresses the role of joint emotion in its concepts of joint action and joint project (von Cranach et al. 1986; Young et al. 1997).

Counselors readily recognize the need to construct joint emotion with their clients and also are aware of its challenges. The joint mirroring of emotion in counseling can range from sharing emotions in a friendly encounter to the secondary traumatization of the counselor (Figley 1995). Indeed, the degree to which counselors allow the client to generate the client’s emotion in them and the degree to which counselors participate in the joint emotion initiated by the client are mirrored in both the quality of counselor–client relationship and the therapeutic alliance. The challenge for counselors is not to adopt this joint emotion as their individual or personal emotion beyond their immediate response to it in counseling. Thus, joint emotion requires good supervision and counselor self-management to walk the tightrope between its effective use and the counselor being subsumed by client emotion.

The emotional climate of a therapist–client encounter can be observed. In counseling informed by contextual action theory, the counselor and/or client often address emotion and the emotional climate in the encounter itself, and can be addressed in the subsequent self-confrontation interview. Understanding the impact of emotions on behavior has implications for more adequately achieving complex understandings of the counseling process.

## Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the commonalities and distinctions between some relevant, innovative twenty first century counseling approaches and issues and contextual action theory. Relational perspectives, constructionism, narrative, systems, intentionality and volition, culture, and emotion are issues counselors cannot ignore. It should be evident from this chapter that contextual action theory and these other innovative approaches to counseling converge in numerous ways. Nonetheless, there are important differences that must be acknowledged, many of which arise from the way that action itself is conceptualized, and the central or peripheral place of action across these theories. We hope that this chapter, together with other chapters in this volume provide a better understanding of our work of the previous 25 years, in formulating and explicating our contextual theory of action and, more recently, exploring how contextual action theory can inform the practice of counseling. More importantly, we hope that we have provided a clear sense of the various ways that counseling informed by contextual action theory connects with and is different from counseling that is grounded in the many other innovative theories that have been presented in the Chaps. 2–8 of this volume.

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**Part III**  
**Applying Contextual Action Theory**  
**in Counseling Settings and Issues**

# Chapter 11

## Counseling Adolescents from an Action Theory Perspective

Sheila K. Marshall, Margo Nelson, Kristen Goessling, Jane Chipman and Grant Charles

The second decade of life involves becoming an adult. Adolescents and other participants in their lives pursue becoming an adult through individual and joint goal-directed actions. The process of becoming adult is socially meaningful in most societies. It involves manifest, observable processes and actions and includes many subjective processes experienced by the participants. Thus, attaining adulthood is, from the perspective of contextual action theory, a project. Although they may not use the term “project,” laypeople see becoming an adult as a project and professionals study it as such. These projects may involve counselors. This chapter describes what may bring individuals to counseling during adolescence and elaborates on some principles outlining how a contextual action approach to counseling adolescents proceeds.

Why does this chapter consider adolescence separately from adulthood? Why did we not subsume adolescence and adulthood under topics for counseling such as addictions, eating disorders, or self-efficacy? The reason is that adolescence is considered, in industrial and post-industrial societies, a unique developmental period because physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social systems undergo simultaneous, rapid, and marked changes (Feldman and Elliott 1990; Holmbeck et al. 2006). Some aspects of these changes generate vulnerabilities for mental illness (e.g., Dorn et al. 2008; McGlashan and Hoffman 2000) and negative life events (Larson and Ham 1993). At the same time, adolescence also heralds possibilities for positive development such as remission from prior childhood behavior difficulties (Barker et al. 2010; Moffitt et al. 2008) and selection and pursuit of longer-term life goals (Nurmi 2004). As such, working with adolescent clients can differ from work with children and adults.

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This chapter is concerned with action and with individuals who are assumed to be developing. Distinguishing between action and development assists in clarifying the processes under consideration in this chapter. Historically, human development has been considered ontogenetic change whereas actions are “enacted intentions” (Brandtstädter 1999, p. 39). Human development is not only the result of actions, such as construction of symbols or activity with others. Human development is also a target of human action; people act on their development through self-reflective and self-regulatory processes (Brandtstädter 2006). This latter process underlies the use of action theory in this chapter. However, we extend the idea to understand how individuals act with others (joint action) on developmental goals such as personal growth and maturity projects. We turn now to describe how some aspects of this theory can be used in working with adolescents.

## **Working with Adolescents from a Contextual Action Theoretical Perspective**

The majority of scholarship about adolescence tends to emphasize understanding what causes individuals to act in certain ways. For example, parenting processes are often used to explain adolescent engagement in delinquency or externalizing behaviors (e.g., de Kemp et al. 2006). Although searching for causes often feels like a valuable starting point for counseling, doing so may result in thinking about adolescent clients as passive at the mercy of their developmental phase, genetic inheritance, or environment. The “why” question with the “because of” answer in mind as a starting point for counseling adolescents does not recognize how adolescents are making sense of their lives. Shifting to using contextual action theory as a guiding framework changes the “why” question. It seeks the “in order to” rather than the “because of” answer. Even better is the question, “What is this adolescent doing?” By changing the question, an image emerges of adolescents as goal-directed rather than as passive individuals influenced by circumstances.

Asking “What is this adolescent doing?” can reveal a lot about goal-directed actions. A research example is illustrative. A longitudinal study with a sample of young adolescents revealed their engagement in problem behaviors was predicted by their views that the behaviors were fun and risky (Maggs et al. 1995). In addition, engagement in problem behaviors predicted, one year later, increased peer acceptance. This study reveals how behaviors that might be viewed as problematic for adolescents’ well-being contribute to something positive—social acceptance. From a contextual action theory perspective, these adolescents perceived themselves to be engaged in meaningful, life-enhancing projects that served a ‘positive’ purpose for them: making friends and being accepted by their peer group.

Many adults, including professionals working with adolescents, interpret such projects as problematic rather than life-enhancing. This, though, is a different problem, it is a disconnection between what adolescents and young people define as being problematic and the definitions understood by these adults and professionals.



For example, adolescents' actions intended to gain or maintain social acceptance can be interpreted by adults as yielding to peer pressure. Engaging in problem behaviors may be viewed as age-related problematic risk-taking from which adolescents need protection. Therefore, while asking "What are they doing (and doing together)?" it is important to consider the assumptions counselors bring to the counseling process when working with adolescents. Indeed, assumptions about adolescence can create wide chasms that can become insurmountable in the counseling process.

Counselors' beliefs about adolescence can significantly influence the counseling process. Stereotypes of adolescence as a period of rebellion, risky behavior, and moody interactions abound even among professionals who work with adolescents (Offer et al. 1981; Seginer and Somech 2000). These stereotypes have been shown to influence social judgment (Gross and Hardin 2007). Counselors, counseling, and adolescents who attend counseling are part of the culture in which stereotypes about adolescence are formed and sustained. Therefore, beliefs and actions influenced and informed by these stereotypes may enter into counselor-adolescent sessions causing both partners to misunderstand their respective perspectives.

Answering the question "What is this person doing?" is a central task in counseling adolescents, particularly because they may not be clear about their goals or projects (Young et al. 2010). In dealing with this question, counselors inherently encounter the social aspects of adolescents' projects. As such, it is also important to ask "Who is involved?" Returning to our example of adolescents having fun and feeling socially accepted through engaging in problem behaviors (Maggs et al. 1995), we can see these projects connect to other people. They obviously involve peers. If adolescents are engaging in problem behaviors with peers, for example, learning how to buy drugs together or watching each other paint graffiti, for fun and social acceptance, we can think of these projects as joint peer relationship projects. In addition to peers, there are likely other actors involved in these projects. To gain a sense of who these other actors might be, we turn to an action theoretical understanding of context.

Boesch's (1991) approach to culture is consistent with contextual action theory and provides a useful understanding of context. We make sense of context by using an approach to culture because we view the two as synonymous. Boesch defined culture as "a field of action" (p. 29). This field of action encompasses the past, present, and future (see Valsiner 2009). Actions and action patterns, over time, become the "world that appears to be ordered, 'transparent', providing the space and the roles for action" (Boesch 1991, p. 362). Culture/context is also a process because it is continuously transformed by actions (Boesch 1991; see also Collins 2004). Using this understanding of context, we return to the question of "Who is involved?" in the adolescents' peer relationship projects derived from our research example.

In our research example, a range of people act in the context of the adolescents' joint peer relationship projects. Older adolescents or young adults may obtain alcohol for the adolescents to drink. Some people work at preventing adolescent problem behaviors by instituting laws or guidelines or implement them. Here, we can imagine the people constructing or applying rules for social behavior as engaged in projects or, with the energy and longevity of joint actions, careers. These rules for action are constructed over time and are guided by goals for the future,

for example, keeping the community safe or keeping adolescents protected. The actions become so ordered and the patterns so ritualized that they seem immovable. For example, laws are constructed from goal-directed actions of concerned citizens. Those laws are enacted and life becomes ordered through patterns of reinforcement; laws are experienced as immovable. But individuals can and do act upon what appear to be immovable patterns. Return to our discussion of adolescents engaged in problem behaviors. The adolescents found those behaviors fun and risky (Maggs et al. 1995). Some of the risk lies in navigating the ‘rules’ of the context, or laws, and not being caught or punished. In a sense, engaging in problem behaviors may be seen as participation in a “don’t get caught” project with the larger context. The risk inherent in “don’t get caught” creates excitement for some adolescents. Navigating risk is an important aspect of working with adolescents and risk-taking can be seen as a normative adolescent phenomenon (Lightfoot 1997). Part of their growing to maturity project is learning how to manage their context(s) and understanding how their actions join the actions of their (larger) context.

There are many ways in which others are involved in the adolescents’ joint peer relationship projects, including social steering, control, and regulation. We can distinguish among social conventions, rules, norms, and legal norms or laws. They differ in a number of aspects, the most important being how they are sanctioned. Breaking a social convention is a minor matter and leads to being exposed to a disagreement with the community. However, breaking a norm, particularly a legal one, leads to a specific, institutionally controlled punishment. One could argue that, while adolescents develop their own capacity for socially responsible actions and projects, they engage in tackling the dimensions of social steering, control, and regulation in constructing and impacting social conventions, rules, and norms. In doing so, they sometimes overlook the fine border between challenging a convention and breaking a law. Thus, engaging in challenging the social control of a society and community is a part of adolescents’ projects of developing their own competencies for social control. In challenging the standards of social steering, they make the processes of social steering, control, and regulation visible.

For some adolescents, the assumption of increasingly adult roles in their families, school, and communities may enable them to consider the ways in which they are linked to their contexts and how their goals and actions may be impeded or facilitated by the actions of others. Many adolescents may experience a sense of ambiguity as encountering rules, norms, and conventions can be new or novel experiences that are difficult to comprehend. For example, adolescents may become aware of the way cultural rules and social contexts differ in the affordances and constraints in relation to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and, significantly for adolescents, age. Counselors working with adolescents are part of these projects and contribute to the construction of cultural rules, norms, and conventions. Thus, addressing the question of “Who is involved?” is integral to understanding not only the larger context but also counselors’ actions with adolescent clients.

In summary, the questions of “What is this adolescent doing?” and “Who is involved and what are they doing together?” help steer the process of work with adolescents. These questions guide counselors’ efforts to understand their clients’ lives and the counseling process with adolescents.

## ***Adolescents and Counseling***

The numerous reasons why adolescents might attend counseling include growth-oriented purposes and to remedy problematic circumstances. We do not intend to cover these reasons comprehensively. Rather, we briefly outline three broad categories of experiences that may bring adolescents to counseling. We then use these descriptions as a springboard for describing how counseling adolescent clients might unfold using contextual action theory.

### ***Mental Health Problems***

Adolescence is the period of the lifespan during which individuals are most likely to experience the onset of serious mental health problems (Kessler et al. 2005; Kessler et al. 2007). Nearly one in five adolescents experience considerable difficulty, and one in ten have a diagnosable disorder that causes significant impairment in social and/or academic functioning (McGee et al. 1990). Aside from psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia that may first emerge in late adolescence, three broad domains of serious mental health problems affect adolescents: internalizing problems (for example, anxiety, depression, and suicide), externalizing problems (for example, antisocial, delinquent, or aggressive behaviors), and substance abuse (Steinberg et al. 2006). These problems tend to overlap and/or co-occur with one another (Mash and Dozois 2003; Steinberg et al. 2006).

Current approaches for understanding adolescent psychopathology do not attribute impairments in mental health to a single cause, for example, inheritance or maltreatment. Instead, they emphasize the role of developmental changes that occur during adolescence, the importance of present and historical environmental and social contexts, the interactions between these factors (Mash and Dozois 2003), and view individuals as active contributors to their own development (Cicchetti and Rogosh 2002).

### ***Distress and Concerns***

Among the majority of adolescents who do not experience serious mental health problems, distress can occur. Since adolescents' lives become more complex with age, distress can arise from the accumulation of negative events (Larson and Ham 1993) or novel challenges across domains such as vocational choices and increasingly complex social and romantic relationships. Most individuals are able to successfully cope with the developmental demands of adolescence (Cicchetti and Rogosh 2002; Steinberg et al. 2006); however, the increasing complexity and occurrence of stressors that adolescents experience also makes effective coping more difficult (Steinberg et al. 2006). Additionally, previously effective means of coping may become ineffective or contribute to problem behaviors or potential psychopathology (Holmbeck et al. 2006).

During adolescence many individuals begin to engage in romantic and sexual partnerships, experience transformations in family relationships, and enter the field of paid labor. Some adolescents experience problems due to difficulties in relationships, for example depressive symptoms during or after ending a romantic partnership (see Welsh et al. 2003), or the management of negative interactions such as conflict in close (Chung et al. 2011) or work-related (Frone 2000) relationships. Although most adolescents manage to successfully resolve problems or distress, some may seek counseling for assistance in managing negative interactions or help adjusting to changes in relationships.

Distress may also emanate from stigma-related interactions. Adolescents from ethnic (Huynh and Fuligni 2010) and sexual (Saewyc 2011) minority groups are more likely to report distress in their lives than adolescents from more widely accepted social groups. A difficulty for adolescents on the receiving end of stigma-related actions is that these stressors tend to be on-going and accumulate over time resulting in diminished capacities to cope effectively (Hatzenbuehler 2009). Stigma-related actions can also interfere with adolescents' consolidation of a coherent identity and generate other intrapersonal difficulties such as identity concerns or distress.

### ***Identity Concerns***

Adolescents' capacity for insight can give rise to identity concerns and existential anxiety (Berman et al. 2006; Erikson 1963, 1968). Identity concerns or distress may emerge as individuals experience difficulties in defining a sense of self that is coherent with their past and anticipated future and is congruent with their current social contexts. Some youth may encounter difficulties defining long-term vocational goals, sexual orientation and behavior, or values about life and relationships, and as a result seek professional assistance to sort out their choices (Young et al. 2011). Although not an indicator of a psychological disorder, difficulty in defining a relatively coherent and satisfying or acceptable sense of self can give rise to emotional distress (Berman et al. 2004) that may lead adolescents to counseling.

Identification of the mental illness or type of distress or concern adolescent clients experience is an important step in their treatment. However, most adolescents will be concerned less with problem identification and more about what their problem(s) means in relation to their lives. The meaning making process is well-supported by counseling guided by contextual action theory. We present two fictional cases to illustrate.

### **Case Examples**

Most adolescent clients fall into one of two broad referral categories; the first would be adult-initiated and the second would be self-initiated or voluntary. Adolescents' motivation may be masked and thus the distinction between the two is not always

clear. However, for the sake of illustration we use these two positions as starting points, and we present two fictional clients and develop respective case conceptualizations.

### ***Case Scenario #1***

Pat is 14-year-old female currently attending a public high school. She lives at home with her mother and younger sister. Pat has always been an above average student, well-liked by her peers, respectful to teachers and adults, and active in extracurricular activities. For the past month, Pat's grades have slipped, she has grown withdrawn, and no longer seems to take interest in things she usually found enjoyable. Her mother also noticed that she had been avoiding her friends and spending most of her time at home alone in her room. Pat's mother went to the school to meet with a teacher to discuss Pat's grades and behavior. The teacher encouraged Pat's mother to talk to her daughter about what is going on and to consider whether she would find it helpful attending sessions with a counselor at the school. Pat's mother went home and told her daughter she had talked to a teacher and wanted Pat to make an appointment immediately to see a counselor. Pat was visibly upset and "very angry that you had a secret meeting about me." Pat's mother said the meeting was not a secret, but that she was so afraid of what was happening and that she wanted some help to understand. Pat went to her room shouting "Stop trying to help, leave it alone, you don't understand." Pat's mother followed her to her room, crying, and asked Pat to "Please, just go see counselor."

The next morning Pat's mother again said "I want you to make an appointment to see a counselor. Please go see the counselor today." After some arguing, Pat responded "OK, I'll go see the counselor if you'll lay off pestering me." Later that day Pat went to the counseling office and said, as if irritated, "My mom said I have to see a counselor."

In her discussion with the counselor, Pat shared that she felt frustrated and isolated. At the beginning of the school year she was going out with Trevor, but hiding information from her mother because Trevor was 18 and he had been caught selling marijuana over the summer. A month into the relationship Pat saw Trevor kissing and fondling another girl, Sarah. When she confronted Trevor, he said "Quit being so controlling. You're not my girlfriend, we just have a good time." Pat felt really hurt but didn't want to talk to anyone because she was so embarrassed. She could not believe that she thought the relationship was going so well. And she really did not want her mother to find out what had happened because she was sure she would be in trouble for going out with Trevor and having sex with him. Pat's feelings of hurt and embarrassment steered her actions of hiding at school and at home.

To begin work with Pat using contextual action theory, we ask "What is Pat doing and who else is involved?" To answer these questions, we observe Pat's actions, the emotions and cognitions steering her actions, and the people linked to Pat's actions. Pat's first action of saying "My mom said I have to see a counselor," could be interpreted as Pat attending counseling because of her mother's urging. But such

an interpretation is inconsistent with an action theoretical perspective that seeks to understand Pat's actions as "in order to". Such understanding may come about by exploring, with Pat, what she understands about counseling, whether she thinks it will be helpful for her, and what she wants from counseling. Along with this exploration of what the counseling might be about for Pat, the counselor can introduce information about confidentiality.

The irritation in Pat's voice may be interpreted as stereotypical adolescent irritation with a parent. But from an action theoretical perspective, the irritation suggests there are negative emotions steering Pat's actions. Noticing, reflection, and curious exploring may be helpful. It is unclear whether Pat wants to attend counseling. Is she trying to get her mother to "get off her back?" Or, is the irritation an expression of something else? Indeed, it may be useful to explore how Pat is feeling at home and at school and whether a joint counseling project might be "how to not feel so crappy" or "how not to feel so irritated."

Since Pat is afraid of bringing attention to what she thinks was "being so stupid about Trevor," her communication with the counselor may reflect reluctance to engage. Indeed, some adolescent clients miss appointments, show up late to sessions, or talk about superficial topics not as a way of disengaging but rather as a way of keeping a secret. This may seem like a small difference but it can be quite significant to the counseling process. Here, stereotypes of adolescence may contribute to the way counseling actions are steered. If adolescents' reluctance to talk is viewed as typical rebellion or moodiness, the counselor may try to respond to the stereotype rather than the client's needs. Instead of respecting the individual's need to keep a secret and thus paradoxically setting the stage for Pat to open up, the counselor might spend time pursuing engagement, and thereby pushing the client away. Occasional checks as to whether stereotypes of adolescence are steering counseling for either the counselor or adolescent may be useful while tentatively exploring Pat's reluctance to talk.

In negotiating and agreeing upon a joint project to work on together, Pat may disclose her distress about her relationship with Trevor. From an action theoretical perspective, Pat's actions link to Trevor, her mother, and her friends. Identification of a joint counseling project will involve exploring the linkages to other projects. For example, Pat and her mother are linked by Pat's efforts to hide her relationship with Trevor and her mother's urging to see a counselor. How these linked actions coalesce into a joint pursuit/withdraw project steered by emotions of fear, frustration, shame, and caring may be something worth exploring. Once identified, the counseling project may involve learning how to use the resources of her mother and friends which allow Pat to participate in a positive social life and feel successful in navigating close relationships.

## *Case Scenario #2*

Sam is a 17-year-old high school student. He lives with his biological parents and has an older brother and younger sister. Sam excels at sports and is popular at school. His parents are supportive of Sam and have high expectations for him that include com-

pleting college and taking over the family business. Over the past six months Sam has been questioning his sexual identity. Sam feels very distressed when he thinks about how his family and friends will react when/if they find out he thinks he is gay. Sam has consistently been a responsible student and a peacemaker in the family. He feels pressure to fulfill his parents' expectations and is terrified to disappoint them.

Sam has been spending a lot of time at a community-based Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth center and participating in some group activities with other youth. Sam decides to seek out a counselor at the LGBTQ center. Sam, unlike Pat in Case Scenario #1, engages in counseling on his own. By engaging voluntarily, he has already begun his counseling project. Meeting with Sam will involve clarifying what this project is about.

Asking "what is he doing?" reveals Sam is engaged in an identity project. Sam is attending group activities at the LGBTQ center. These actions are steered by his discomfort of not being sure about his sexuality and his fears about not living up to his past social reputation and family expectations. With his current sense of self not entirely coherent with his past, Sam feels some distress about his identity. His is engaged in an identity project. In addition to the LGBTQ center activities, Sam views counseling as a resource for his identity project. Through the counseling process, Sam can jointly work with a counselor toward establishing a self-narrative that is relatively coherent and acceptable.

The counselor can help Sam deepen his awareness of who he has been and who he is becoming. To that end, however, it will be important to consider who else is involved in Sam's identity project. Exploration of who else is involved helps Sam understand his distress and how the identity project intersects with other projects.

Sam views himself as playing an important role in maintaining positive family relationships and as responsible for sustaining the family business. Sam is involved in a family relationship project with his parents and siblings. He receives support from his parents and he is a peacekeeper in the family. He loves his family and wants to be accepted by them, but fears that if they find out he is gay then they will reject him. Sam's relationship project is steered by his love and his fears of rejection. The family relationship project appears to undergird and intersect with a family career development project. This project involves joint steps taken toward ensuring Sam has the education and support to successfully take over the family business. Sam's parents provide emotional and financial support while Sam strives to live up to their expectations for his success and the success of the family business. This joint family career development project is sustained by the external resources, for example, business customers, banks, and schools, that make it possible for the family to engage in their joint actions.

Sam is also involved in a peer relationship project at school. He has experienced the school setting as an environment where he has been popular and successful. His peer relationship project at school is steered by his feelings of acceptance and carried out by Sam's involvement in sports and other activities. The school administration and staff help maintain Sam's peer relationship project by supporting sports and other activities. The other students and their families, to the extent families are also involved, sustain the peer relationship project through their actions with Sam.

Sam's identity project involves family and peers. Although the family relationship project, family career development project, and peer relationship project have been salient for Sam in the past, the identity project has been brought to the fore by Sam's current distress. That is, the identity project is at the top of the hierarchy of projects as Sam tries to resolve his discomfort with incongruent self-views.

For Sam, confronting this new aspect of his identity brings to the forefront an awareness of the cultural rules about a non-heterosexual identity and how those rules may accrue disadvantages and difficulties to a non-heterosexual identity. Sam has already expressed concern that being seen as gay will bring about disappointment from his family and rejection by peers. These feelings steer his actions; Sam is acting on cultural rules by following the proscription imparted by the context. Counseling is a resource for Sam to manage some of the distress he feels when encountering cultural rules.

Through a working alliance, the counselor might work with Sam to jointly act to diminish Sam's identity distress. Sam's distress is due to his understanding that several of his important joint projects appear to be incongruent with his emerging self-views. The incongruence emerging between projects is not due to causal associations whereby others' goal-directed actions are the source of Sam's distress. Such a view blames parents, peers, and the larger cultural context for Sam's discomfort and appears to situate Sam as a passive victim. From a contextual action project perspective, Sam will be able to pursue a life-facilitating and socially constructive identity project by deepening his understanding of the interrelations between people and projects in his life. More concretely, counseling with Sam may involve beginning a new project, such as a joint social safety project. Sam's involvement at school has historically provided an affirming environment where he maintained his identity as a positive leader. The school now represents a potential risk for social rejection. Sam's success in school is no longer perceived as meeting his needs for safety and belonging. Sam may benefit from counseling work that involves finding resources in the school which support a sense of safety in that setting. Likewise, a counselor might also engage Sam in reflecting on how he can participate in joint family projects without feeling his identity project or other life-enhancing projects are being steered toward detrimental directions.

## Summary

Most individuals do not report experiencing a tumultuous adolescence (Compas and Reesland 2009). However, some experience difficulties which may bring them to counseling. Although many of these problems are similar to those of adults, working with adolescents is different. First, developmental processes for the two age periods are distinct. Secondly, there is an added obligation to protect adolescent clients against certain types of harm because they are minors. Being a resource to adolescents is an ethical response by counselors. However, this response can also trap counselors in viewing the counseling process as a search for causes of behavior



in order to determine how to protect adolescent clients. These searches can result in viewing adolescents as passive recipients of causal forces instead of goal-directed actors participating in their own development. In this chapter, we have highlighted some of the ways contextual action theory helps counselors look at behaviors of adolescents and merge the social, subjective, and observable processes. It allows counselors to understand how adolescents make meaning of their lives, alone and jointly with others, and what brings them to counseling. In particular, we dealt with the issue of managing incongruent adolescent projects, one of the foci contextual action theory stresses. Using this approach, two broad questions help orient the initiation of counseling: “What is this adolescent doing?” and “Who is involved and what are they doing together?” Engagement in these questions with adolescent clients is a departure point for optimizing counseling processes or joint growing to maturity projects.

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# Chapter 12

## Counseling Intentional Addiction Recovery Grounded in Relationships and Social Meaning

Matthew Graham and Chris Bitten

Addiction and recovery are complex social processes. They are complex in that problematic misuse of only one substance is rare. They are further complicated by the fact that various psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., PTSD, depression, anxiety and pain disorder, personality disorders) are often co-morbid with substance misuse (Rush et al. 2008). Use of addictive substances and engagement in addictive behaviors are sometimes conceptualized as attempts to regulate powerful and negative emotions through escape or distraction (Aldao et al. 2009). Research has clarified that persons with addictions issues make substantial efforts to address and recover from these problems, whether or not they use professional assistance (Rumpf et al. 2006). These recovery efforts inevitably involve significant others in their lives, suggesting the need to view the process of recovery through a relational lens (Sellman 2009; White and Kelly 2011a). A subset of the research enterprise has shifted to focus on recovery as a long-term, goal-directed process that is best understood through the complex relational narrative of the affected person (Hser and Anglin 2011; White and Kelly 2011b).

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how contextual action theory (CAT) (Valach et al. 2002) can inform the understanding and treatment of clients working toward recovery from problematic substance use. CAT provides a framework to help counselors build their therapeutic interventions and it is a theory that acknowledges the complexity of addiction recovery by emphasizing joint intentional processes over time (Hser and Anglin 2011).

What follows is a discussion of multiple aspects of CAT and the application to the practice of addiction treatment, beginning with a review of human behavior as goal-directed action. The systemic nature of action will be discussed, distinguishing among its hierarchical levels that steer, control, and contain subconscious and unconscious regulation processes and the application to the conceptualization of

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addiction treatment practice. The systemic order of actions, projects and career is described. The relational nature of joint actions and projects and the postulate of equal value of social meaning, subjective processes and manifest behavior are illustrated. Recommendations are made with the goal of developing CAT-informed counseling practices such as: the therapeutic alliance, conceptualizing the life-enhancing recovery project, and working with emotion and emotional memory. The chapter ends with a preliminary examination of how the action project method could be incorporated into the CAT-informed therapist's toolbox.

## **Action Theory as a Guide**

CAT focuses the counselor on the intentional, goal-directed nature of recovery and the concurrent life projects that clients are consciously and unconsciously constructing with meaningful others. For example, a client recounted that he politely excused himself to take a soothing hot shower in the middle of a fight with his wife. Together with his counselor, the client had previously planned this stress reduction and "time out" action. He then made a successful conflict repair attempt through a conversation with his wife and was able to avoid the use of alcohol to self-medicate. The goals and skills displayed had been identified and rehearsed in the counseling session. Exploration of goals provides a way to understand the relationship between current concerns and tasks—and higher-order goals and projects that have been sabotaged through substance misuse.

By identifying and explaining the purposes and goals that are embedded in actions, CAT situates addiction recovery within the larger context of the client's desired life direction; the client's life direction may be very embryonic in the early stages of recovery. The following example illustrates the relationship between recovery, the desired life and the different perspectives on action. In response to his counselor's question about previous "peak experiences," the client describes a time when he was wilderness camping in winter. It was intensely spiritual for him (internal processes), and during his recovery, this memory formed a way he could understand spirituality in the context of 12-step programs (social meaning). Additionally, it guided him to seek outdoor employment (observable behaviors), and for the first time in his life work became something he enjoyed and valued. A CAT-informed counselor would provide information and assist the client to make links between the dimensions of action manifested in his story.

Although suffering from drug-induced neurological changes that influence his behavior, the addicted person nonetheless engages in behaviors that are purposeful. Using the lens of intentionality and goals, the counselor realizes that goals are dynamic, unfolding, and both clarified and constructed within relationship.

## Linking Counseling and Recovery

### *Relational Perspective*

Attention to how treatment approaches lack sensitivity to relationship dynamics has become a key theme in the addictions literature (McCrary 2004; Orford et al. 2005). CAT guides the counselor to consider the impact of both life-enhancing and life-limiting actions across various levels of relationship such as close relationships, family systems, work systems and recovery-oriented groups. A counselor may ask, “What are the ways that your family and friends have responded to you struggling with addiction?” or “What are you and “X” doing together toward recovery?” A focus on the jointly-held nature of goals, actions and projects can structure initial assessments and interventions. Understanding the relational dimensions provides a realistic portrayal of how addiction recovery is constructed and experienced in daily life. CAT extends a bi-directional view of relationship by guiding the counselor to focus on joint construction of goals, meaning and actions within recovery relationships. Without a complex relational-process frame to guide her interventions the counselor may inadvertently slip into attending to the emotionally salient or “risk-laden” elements of addiction or recovery behaviors that her training discipline has decided need attention.

The concepts of joint-action and projects permit counselors, no matter their adherence to a particular clinical intervention approach, to support a number of life-enhancing recovery pathways (see Biernacki 1986). Although the goal of abstinence is often primary (Sellman 2009), this may mean purposefully foregrounding the vocational career or the marriage relationship because meaningful movement in these areas, even if imperfectly undertaken, can energize the abstinence project.

### **The Counseling Project**

Addiction counseling is a joint project. Running along the backbone of CAT is the idea that most human behaviors take the form of joint goal-directed actions (short-term), projects (mid-term), and career (long-term) (Young et al. 2005). The counseling project is guided and regulated through communication. Done well, it accounts for the power of structure and relationships, harnessing emotions effectively to enliven therapeutic interventions and behavioral homework. The counseling relationship is ordered through three levels or subsystems: internal steering, control, and regulation processes (Valach and Young 2001). The following example serves to illustrate these subsystems.

A client, after several unsuccessful attempts to achieve abstinence from cocaine while maintaining her friendships with drug users, develops with the counselor a set of detailed plans to turn down invitations from these friends (and role-plays the plans); these plans are made with the recognition that there is often a limbo state

which exists during the period of developing a recovery-oriented social group. The counselor helps her to anticipate anxious and sad emotions, teaches self-soothing techniques and introduces the skill of affect tolerance (in other words, that not all emotions need “medication” with drugs; they can be allowed, or “sat with”).

### ***Internal Steering Processes***

Internal processes refer to the cognitions and emotions that provide a steering function for actions. Emotions (see Greenberg 2004) drive or energize action (see Young et al. 1997). Cognitions constitute the rationale or justification for continued engagement in new, healthier actions. As well, a strong and clear rationale might serve to motivate these actions. Plans for change will be further propelled as the client develops and deepens relationships within a community that promotes these behaviors.

The CAT-informed counselor brings the dynamic impact of thoughts and feelings into client awareness. In the example above, the counselor helped the client to explore reasons in favor of and against continuing friendships with drug users. The shared goal of abstinence informs the counselor’s choice to teach self-regulation, which is needed as the client takes steps (which have been developed with the counselor) toward joining a recovery group. Doing this offers the client a way of understanding her current behavior patterns that, in turn, provides her with new insight she can use as a resource for self-intervention (trying new behaviors not yet identified in counseling) and behavior change. The client can also benefit from the mere knowledge that cognitions steer and emotions energize. With this knowledge, clients report feeling relieved that they neither need to act on every emotion nor believe every thought their brain produces. Steering processes are typically socially meaningful both within the counseling relationship and within the client’s life context. For internal or steering processes to be effective, counselors must use control processes to jointly establish the goals of counseling that link to the goals of the recovery project.

### ***Control Processes***

At the mid-range level are processes used to exert control over action. These are defined in functional terms and help to identify the contiguous steps of action, project or career. Functional steps are the cognitive-emotional and behavioral ‘how’ of carrying out personal and joint goals. A CAT-informed addiction counselor considers the control processes for specific counseling actions, the counseling relationship and the long-term process of change targeted by the client. Control processes are exerted in the previous example as the client is guided to role-play new skills and develop meta-cognitive practices that help her evaluate her actions from immediate

and supra-goal perspectives. Finally, through planning, the client is engaged and debriefed after she uses new relationship skills in context.

### ***Regulation Processes***

The lowest level process is defined as regulation and concerns the elements of action, project and career; these include behaviors observed in physical terms that embody the above-described processes of steering and control. It includes the micro-components of the counselor's specific observational skills, communication skills, and interventions. Regulatory processes can inhibit or facilitate an action; these processes could include what happens as the client or counselor adapts to environmental or relational conditions operating at the edge or outside of awareness.

In the previous example in which the client is attempting to reconcile the goals of stopping cocaine usage while maintaining friendships with active users, the counselor's empathic tone of voice and close attention to the client's shifting facial and body messages are valuable tools for regulating the pace and context of the sessions and being alert to resistance. Another example of a regulatory process is the counselor's use of subtle verbal and non-verbal cues to slow the pace of an extremely talkative client in order to allow space for emotions to be acknowledged and reflection on content to occur. Similarly, when a counselor leaves the last 10 min of a session for written recapitulation and affirmation of the short-term and long-term goals, noting the skills needed and progress made, she consolidates the joint actions of the counseling session in service of the recovery project.

### ***Communication***

CAT theorizes that communication process and emotional regulation processes simultaneously occur at the level of the individual and at multiple levels within a group (ranging from dyadic relationship to community involvement). Therefore, it is suggested that the CAT-informed addiction counselor keep in mind that communication in the process of goal-setting, steering, controlling and monitoring both the counseling and addiction recovery projects must be explicitly planned for and considered at multiple levels.

At the goal-setting level, the addiction–recovery project is structured through the communicative organization of a hierarchy and sequence of goals. This hierarchical sequence likely is dynamic and very much context-dependent. A CAT view on culture here promotes careful consideration of the multiple “fields” within which recovery action must take place (Graham et al. 2008). With a meticulous consideration of emotional regulation, cognitive reactance and behavior, communication is the template and action for structuring the goals, strategies, and elements of the recovery project (Valach and Young 2001).



## CAT-Informed Assessment

The CAT-informed addictions counselor begins the counseling relationship with a discussion of the initial actions that began both the addiction project as well as those actions that characterize the budding (or perhaps stalled) recovery project. Assessment is conceptualized as joint action and can be framed simultaneously as information gathering and intervention. CAT guides the counselor toward the identification of persons who are important to the client and to past and current individual and joint projects relating to identity, vocation and family. Naming both process and outcome goals connected to a client-defined preferred future helps to consolidate client meanings for addiction recovery. The counselor seeks to understand patterns of addiction and recovery within the client's relational and societal context and pressures (Alexander 2000; Dingel et al. 2011).

The following example illustrates how a broad narrative assessment helps to uncover motivated projects and, in turn, open a focus for the counseling. Consider a client attending a return-to-work program with the goal of prescription opioid elimination and presenting with secondary addiction concerns, that is, cocaine and marijuana. An addiction treatment center would traditionally recommend that addiction behavior be addressed before the client begins their program (30 days of abstinence). However, CAT-informed practice would suggest it is viable for the counselor to approach the problems in another order. For example, imagine the client is not in denial about her use, asks about her potential for relapse to be assisted through random urine drug testing and is offered a graduated return to work plan to a job that she clearly enjoys and is established as a "safe, non-drug using" environment. The counselor at the program is aware that the pain-management curriculum includes teaching on coping skills, relapse prevention planning and emotional processing, all of which can substitute for an in-house treatment setting. As counseling work begins, important life projects are identified and considerable effort is taken to foster supportive relationships, both professional and collegial. The common thread among these relationships is an acknowledgement that recovery is a longer-term process that, with appropriate management, need not preclude vocational training and engagement with multiple life projects simultaneously.

CAT-informed addiction counselors guide clients to connect with the meaningful beginning of patterns of substance misuse. For example, in the depths of agonizing over a life-limiting marijuana usage pattern, a client stops and recounts the story of how smoking marijuana began as a strategy for managing anxiety and deepening social connections. The counselor helps him identify the valid social needs buried within this strategy and empathizes with the impact of his family of origin: attachment relationships were impaired by parents who drank alcohol on a daily basis. Over the course of counseling, goal-directed language helps clients understand the connection between coping attempts with valid goals (forming friendships and reducing anxiety) and unproductive strategies (drug use). The counselor who is warmly understanding of the client's social context and previous attempts at solving problems, however poorly those attempts turned out, provides a balm of empathy

and acknowledgement that is rarely experienced by clients with addictions. Too often, they have been given advice without the gifts of inquiry and validation.

## **The Therapeutic Alliance**

Goal consensus and a deep collaboration between counselor and client play a significant role in addiction treatment outcome (Tryon and Winograd 2002). The therapeutic alliance is an intentional endeavor: a byproduct of clear goals and functional steps worked out between the counselor and client (Mackrill 2011). Development of the alliance includes relational choices and use of skills that can be facilitative of particular feelings states which can then, in turn, vivify a variety of actions and enact the goals of counseling.

Depending on the therapist's training, for example, behaviorist, client-centered, or psychodynamic, the therapeutic alliance becomes an end goal, strategy and a relationship project. It is a joint project even if the client is not fully aware of the transformative potential in such a relationship. For example, the therapeutic relationship can help to heal attachment difficulties (goal and strategy) out of which addiction behaviors may have long ago developed. It can provide a template for learning new relationship strategies and skills with which the client may undertake the transition into a new or modified community supportive of the recovery project.

## **Facilitating the Life-Enhancing Recovery Project**

The counselor investigates the interplay between the various actions, projects and careers in the client's life, and helps him make connections between salient actions and projects. Counselors also help to clarify the evolving relationship between individual and joint addiction recovery and the tensions and goals that characterize joint actions and projects. Clients having difficulty with substance misuse nevertheless continue to engage in some life-enhancing actions and, potentially, life-enhancing projects; however poorly and/or inconsistently. Marriages and romantic relationships do continue, parenting occurs, and even hobbies can be maintained. Persons more established in recovery often contribute to the health and well being of others that are in earlier stages in the recovery process.

The client's resistance to both counseling actions and project transition is to be expected; it then becomes necessary to work with the client to frame the problem and identify resources or lack thereof. For example, the client may not want to confront the losses addiction has caused. He can be taught that grieving has a beginning, middle and end, and skills for tolerating the emotions associated with grief. He can be encouraged by learning that grief that is processed, not suppressed, will likely eventually transform into an urge to invest in new projects. For the client, this journey is vastly different from, and profoundly more dynamic than, his previous

stuck patterns of suppression or masking of emotional memories (stalled emotions) by substance use.

The counselor can clarify the problems and resources found at each level of functioning within the action system. A cognitive frame to guide or steer functional behaviors is different from the need to identify and facilitate a response to the problem of emotional regulation. It is important, for example, to differentiate between a historical moment where a traumatic experience needs reprocessing versus understanding and effectively managing the impact of this past experience across current functioning.

## **CAT and the “Addict” Identity**

Established theories of addiction tend to be divided on whether the “addict” identity is considered freeing, helpful or constrictive. Allowing multiple perspectives to come to bear on addiction and the addiction career (e.g., Levy and Anderson 2005) is of conceptual relevance to both the issue of identity formation of the ‘addict’ as well as to the definition of addiction career. Action theory locates itself in between an essentialist view and a social constructionist view of identity (Young et al. 2011). In working with identity, the CAT-informed counselor explores the client-assigned meaning of identity and how the client simultaneously receives identity from his or her current contexts. A person in recovery may be loath to identify as an “alcoholic” or “addict” and instead may maintain that she participates in an “alternative lifestyle” (Rødner 2005). Identity can be fluid and rapidly evolving and warrants respect and attention. CAT allows for multiple constructions and explanations (see Agar 2002) of identity which apply to persons who are attempting life-enhancing projects and career within their unique life narratives. Attending to the breadth of the client’s narrative validates underappreciated, and sometimes forgotten, dimensions of the self-schema that, when reintroduced, can provide an internal resource and source of strength for difficult recovery actions.

## **Work**

Clients struggling with substance misuse may not receive effective career/employment counseling and may face a variety of barriers, including the counselor’s belief that she does not possess the necessary skills to counsel a persons vocational career needs and addiction recovery tasks simultaneously. Savickas (2004) maintained that “careers involve the psychosocial integration of self-concepts and social roles. They are constructed by recursive transactions between individuals and their environments” (p. 659). The CAT-informed addictions counselor includes assessment of goals and preferences relating to the development of work actions and projects. The client-in-recovery may lack relational support, courage and/or skill to move

towards meaningful work. It is imperative to obtain a clear picture of client work goals and this may precipitate joining with the client in foregrounding work actions and projects. From a CAT perspective, counselors may need to help facilitate multiple projects (i.e., vocational and recovery) and help to case-manage by contacting other helping professionals to allow both projects to be facilitated simultaneously. For example, it is feasible for a vocational counselor to integrate a client's relapse prevention plan into the goals and strategies necessary to return to work.

## **Addressing Emotion and Emotional Memory**

Addictive behaviors are often characterized as “symptoms” of an underlying inability to regulate emotions and physiological processes. One explanation comes from the concept of “addictive personality.” However, empirical evidence about the existence of an addictive personality is inconclusive (Holderness et al. 1994). Several studies have demonstrated the high degree of co-occurring mental health diagnoses with substance misuse (Rush et al. 2008). The historically grounded nature and complexity of addiction treatment requires both focus on specific, historical emotionally laden events and joining with the client to construct the daily process of the recovery project (see Graham 2009).

Young et al. (2011) have distinguished between emotions as embodied in action and emotional memories that may be triggered or evoked during ongoing actions and projects. Emotional memory interferes with action processes. Emotional memory is not emphasized as the primary clinical symptom, instead emotional memory is examined to identify its specific impact on action, internal processes, social meaning and observable behaviors. More specifically, the counselor helps the client to distinguish between global interference and specific interference of emotional memory. Furthermore, the levels of steering, control and regulation are explored. The counselor attends to the guiding goals for transforming emotional memory, the specific steps needed to assist the client in (co)regulating strong or unwanted emotion and successfully executing plans, and the regulatory elements that comprise these steps.

## **Action Project Method as an Intervention for Addiction Recovery**

The action-project method is a team-based, video-assisted research tool designed to assist pairs or groups of individuals to identify and track goal-directed joint projects (Young et al. 2005). The specific details of this method have been described in detail elsewhere in this volume. The following paragraphs illustrate how various facets of the method, including the “self-confrontation” interview, contain potential as a therapeutic intervention.

A previous study utilized this method with persons who were in close relationships and jointly engaged in addiction recovery (Graham 2009). Participants in this study welcomed having their ongoing addiction recovery projects identified and accepted as having value. Regular phone calls inquiring about developments and internal processes related to their ongoing recovery project seemed to act, in some cases, as both an accountability mechanism and as a precipitant for positive change.

In the Graham (2009) study, the self-confrontation interview acted as an intervention in service of either the participant's close relationship project and/or the recovery project. At the beginning and end of the study, approximately 6 months apart, participants came to the research setting and engaged in a video-taped conversation about how they were "recovering together." Following this, each partner separately watched the conversation played back with one of the researchers. The conversation was broken into segments and the participant was asked, "What were you thinking?", "What were you feeling?", or "What was your goal?" for each segment. As a result, the participants reported a deepened connection with how conversational actions were influenced by the specific goals of their joint recovery project. They noted being surprised that specific goals functioned outside of their awareness. For example, one partner realized that a goal she was unaware she acted upon in "recovery" conversations was to steer the talk away from any topics that could be perceived as "risky" or emotionally charged. Doing this, she realized, helped protect her from experiencing emotions of concern over relapse.

A barrier to developing the entire CAT method into an intervention for persons dealing with addiction is the degree to which it becomes labor-intensive. A potential solution is to focus on the self-confrontation interview, as discussed above, which has consistently demonstrated therapeutic value by simultaneously promoting client intra- and interpersonal awareness. The self-confrontation interview could be adopted into the counseling repertoire of a CAT-informed therapist as an assessment tool or intervention to focus knowledge translation from therapy session to daily practice. The method would specifically fit where addiction-oriented couples counseling was taking place. A more systematic study of this method as an intervention could lead to its integration into addiction treatment program delivery, as either an adjunct treatment or an embedded method through which to develop more comprehensive theories of addiction recovery through the process of treatment.

## Conclusion

When considering the addiction recovery project, CAT-informed counselors attend to multiple viewpoints including: goals, strategies, elements, joint and individual action, project and career, manifest behaviors, social meaning, and internal processes. These projects and careers are complex, continuing constructions. The recovery project is constructed within the client narrative, validated and shaped by observed actions and projects, and through a dynamic process understanding of context and social meaning.

The CAT-informed counselor attends to individual and joint goals from an understanding of process-defining and outcome-focused goals. She holds to a teleological understanding of action wherein multiple levels of intentionality act on the counseling process. Evaluation takes place at the level of functional step, joint action, or the full sequence of counseling interventions. CAT-informed addiction counseling goes beyond the view that addiction is located within the individual and instead locates addiction and recovery within joint action processes over time.

The CAT framework for addiction counseling accomplishes a number of purposes. First, the lens of action keeps the counselor simultaneously focused on individual and social goals and processes that previously led to life-limiting patterns and can now lead to the restoration of life-enhancing relational processes. It also keeps the counselor focused on the fact that the observable behavior of the client can only truly be understood within the above-described context. Second, the lens of project and career addresses several problems in the literature, including theories and methods that are not sufficiently sophisticated to manage the interpersonal dynamics operating in addiction recovery (Simmons 2006). Addiction counseling as a joint project places in the foreground the dynamic and intentional work of building or reclaiming multiple life projects, including addiction recovery, that are meaningful to the client and those they hold dear. Addiction recovery is a career that must be nested within relationships and guided by the overarching goal of making a fulfilling life.

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## Chapter 13

# Adolescent Eating Disorders: A Contextual Action Theory Approach to Family-Based Counseling

Krista Socholotiuk

The purpose of this chapter is to offer contextual action theory as a framework for counseling families with an adolescent who has an eating disorder. Eating disorders are serious, complex, and potentially chronic mental health conditions accompanied by serious physiological sequelae (Keel 2010; Pinzon and Beimers 2005). As such, the treatment of an adolescent eating disorder requires a team of professionals and caregivers, including the family (American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2006; National Institute for Clinical Excellence [NICE] 2004). Adolescence is the peak age of onset for an eating disorder (American Psychiatric Association 2000; Lucas et al. 1991), and because most adolescents live with their families, parents and siblings represent an important social context. The presence of an eating disorder in a family also places incredible stress on the family system (Hillage et al. 2006; Treasure et al. 2001). Many normal family activities and commitments must be put on hold or subordinated to the immediate care needs of the adolescent (Hillage et al. 2006). Yet, families can be an invaluable source of support for the adolescent as he or she fights the tyranny of the eating disorder (Honey and Halse 2006). Families will be better equipped to support the adolescent and bear the stress that treatment evokes if they have a shared understanding of the illness and how to best support their loved one.

Counselors working with adolescent eating disorders will find the action theory framework nonprescriptive, and appreciate that its application does not require the abandonment of one's professional counseling theory (Young et al. 2011). Counselors will find the action framework is systematic and pragmatic, and naturally directs clinical attention to the adolescents' and family members' personal and joint realities at the level of meaning, cognition and emotion, and behavior. In this way, counselors can think of action theory as a meta-framework capable of integrating different treatments and counseling theories, including informal theories held by the clients. Counselors who adopt an action theory framework will also find it to be

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a valuable way to identify and work with key eating disorder processes within the family, as well as counseling processes more generally.

## **Overview of Recommended Treatments for Adolescent Eating Disorders**

Much of the treatment research in eating disorders has focused on adults (Mitchell et al. 2007). However, out-patient treatment that features parent involvement and family counseling are indicated in the treatment for bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, and eating disorder not otherwise specified (APA 2006; NICE 2004). It is important to note that the nature and degree of involvement by the family is always a clinical judgment made on a case-by-case basis, and there may be circumstances where family involvement will be limited (le Grange et al. 1992).

Generally speaking, the recommended treatment for bulimia nervosa is a family-based approach featuring cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) developmentally adjusted the adolescent (Lock 2010; NICE 2004). The cognitive-behavioral approach attends primarily to the individual cognitive processes within the adolescent that have served to create and maintain the eating disorder. The initial focus of this approach is psycho-education on weight and nutrition, and correcting misconceptions about food and dieting. The psycho-educational aspect of treatment can be done conjointly with the adolescent and the family. The aim is to re-establish regular eating patterns and nutritional balance, and often a dietician will be involved to help create a healthy and reasonable eating plan. Much cognitive-behavioral work focuses on the individual, and so the subsequent tasks of motivating the adolescent to change, teaching him or her how to notice and monitor automatic thoughts, to improve problem solving skills, and to practice positive self-affirmation is usually done between the counselor and the adolescent. Parents and other family members may have their own counseling sessions apart from the adolescent, or family members may be invited to attend some counseling sessions conjointly with the adolescent.

Family-based treatment (FBT; Lock et al. 2001) is a recommended treatment for adolescents with anorexia nervosa (APA 2006; NICE 2004), although it has been shown useful in the treatment of bulimia nervosa as well (Doyle et al. 2009; le Grange et al. 2007). The evidence for the use of FBT for adolescent anorexia nervosa comes from a small but growing collection of randomized clinical trials that have found it to be more effective in the short term than treatment as usual (Fisher et al. 2010). In FBT the refusal to eat is viewed as a behavioral problem treated by the application of behavioral principles of change, like creating a clear, consistent, and reasonable program for weight restoration using consequences for not eating and locating incentives for eating. Although FBT is highly structured, it is designed to provide counselors experienced in the treatment of eating disorders with techniques and strategies to treat the eating disorder while still using their own treatment styles in any given setting (Lock et al. 2001).

FBT has three phases, and parents play an important role throughout. The chief goal of the initial phase is for the parents to help their adolescent re-gain weight. Weight restoration is the process by which parents employ empathic but unyielding demands for the adolescent to eat a high calorie diet until malnutrition has been reversed and eating patterns and weight have returned to normal. Once the adolescent has accepted his or her caregivers' requirement to eat, and there is steady weight gain and stabilization, phase two of treatment begins. The focus in the second phase is shifting control of eating back to the adolescent and addressing family problems as they relate to the parents' task of supporting weight maintenance for the adolescent. The final phase focuses on re-establishing a healthy relationship between the parents and the adolescent where the eating disorder is no longer the basis for interaction. In this phase, families might work on providing the adolescent with greater autonomy or reorganizing the parents' life together as their adolescent embraces independence (Lock et al. 2001).

Counselors wishing to work with families, whether it is with a CBT or FBT model, face a challenge in practice. Neither CBT nor FBT offers a conceptualization of the problems and processes families experience in implementing these programs, or of the counseling processes associated with them. For example, counselors practicing FBT use behavioral and learning theory to support the parents in their weight restoration activities, and behavioral theory is an influential conceptual lens through which the adolescent, the family, and the helping processes are viewed. Consider the following three examples. First, counselors are encouraged to have no stance on what processes occurred, or are occurring, to bring about the eating disorder (Lock et al. 2001). Disinterest in the cause of the eating disorder is consistent with behaviorism and is intended to keep the parents focused on the immediate task of weight restoration (Lock et al. 2001). Second, the adolescent is conceptualized as ill and out of control in regard to eating. This stance is likewise consistent with behavioral theory, meant to help the parents depersonalize the adolescent's defiance and protests at weight restoration. Finally, the counselor's role in FBT is more of advisor or consultant whose main job is to remind parents of their inherent skills, and if needed, provide problem-solving support as the parents work out their own mutually agreeable solutions to weight restoration problems (Lock et al. 2001). The challenge for the counselor is that behavioral theory insufficiently attends to the problems and processes families and counselors face in actual implementation. The same problem emerges with a CBT approach. Cognitive and behavioral theory provide ample guidance for working with the thoughts and behaviors of the individual adolescent or parent, but leaves the intricate system of interrelated emotionally charged beliefs and behaviors occurring between family members, or between a counselor and family members, unaddressed. However, a comprehensive framework like action theory can help. The application of the action theory as a meta-framework for the implementation of these recommended approaches allows counselors' conceptualizations to better reflect the complex processes their clients are living with, and will point counselors and families to new perspectives, actions, and interventions that may improve the success of the treatment.

## Action Theoretical Conceptualization of an Eating Disorder

Contextual action theory takes a distinct understanding of human behavior, and these assumptions will guide how the counselor understands and makes interventions in the treatment of adolescent eating disorders. The counselor may still employ the conceptualizations and interventions used in CBT or FBT, for example, but always with the understanding that the eating disorder and related family processes are fundamentally joint, goal-directed actions (Valach et al. 2002). Most of the ways in which the action theory framework will shape family counseling branch from this core assumption. When the assumption is extended to the work of counseling families, the adolescent's eating disorder and the family processes around the eating disorder are understood as joint, goal-directed actions.

In addition to a distinct collection of interventions and techniques, CBT therapy and FBT both subscribe to a theory of human behavior, and some of these assumptions will need to bend to an action theory understanding of human behavior. The counselor wishing to apply action theory as a meta-framework will need to attend carefully to how the respective assumptions play out in his or her conceptualizations and interventions. Consider the following examples of how action theory will shift clinical understanding and actions.

When the eating disorder and family eating disorder behaviors are seen as joint, goal-directed actions, the function or meaning of the eating disorder, as well as the meaning of the family's actions around the eating disorder becomes quite important. This perspective requires a counselor to begin to think in terms of 'in order to' rather than 'because of' explanations (Michel and Valach 1997). The use of in-order-to explanations represents a corollary assumption of action theory, and in-order-to explanations will receive greater emphasis in clinical conceptualizing than causal explanations. In doing so, the counselor can be certain his or her conceptualizations resonate closely with the experience of the adolescent, and the family, who also understand their own and others' behaviors as being about something meaningful, rather than being caused by some antecedent thing (Young et al. 1996). Those familiar with FBT will appreciate that in-order-to explanations also work to avoid inadvertently conferring blame on the adolescent or the family, a major concern in that approach (Lock et al. 2001).

Another corollary assumption to action theory's explanation of human behavior as meaningful and goal-directed is that people are agentic (Valach et al. 2002). Most counseling theories recognize people have the ability to make the choice to engage in action. However, behavioral theory is an exception. As such, whereas FBT would encourage the counselor to develop the idea amongst family members that the adolescent has temporarily lost control of his or her thinking and feelings regarding food, a perspective consistent with behavioral theory, it is discordant with action theory. The purpose of seeing the adolescent as out of control of his or her thinking in FBT is to depersonalize the adolescent's resentment and opposition at weight res-

toration. Yet, this conceptualization is unlikely to fit with most counselors', family members', or adolescents' understandings of the behavior. Therefore, the strategy of portraying the adolescent as lacking control in eating and food-related behaviors would be worked with differently in order to maintain the agency and independence of the adolescent by viewing him or her as a self-motivated and responsible person. Instead, the adolescent's eating disorder actions would be seen as organized and guided by processes occurring simultaneously and interdependently at the three levels of experience outlined in action theory: social meaning, internal psychological processes, and manifest behaviors.

The first level of action organization is social meaning, or the adolescent's reason for his or her eating disorder actions. Action theory understands meaning by looking to the goal of the eating disorder action, and by doing so, the agency and autonomy of the adolescent is maintained. For example, 17-year-old Jody<sup>1</sup> is a high school senior who might explain her last binge-purge as something she did in order to stop an unrelenting and overwhelming sense of bad feelings. Jody may feel out of control once the binge begins, but the action will always be about something for her. Working with her counselor, the social meaning of the binge-purge comes to light. Not only was she consumed with anxiety about a very important final exam, but earlier in the day she experienced a terrible argument with her boyfriend that left her feeling uncared for, lonely, and misunderstood. By the time Jody got home from working with a critical and belittling co-worker at her part-time job, she felt something had to be done to stop the emotional pain. For a brief moment in time, the binge met this need.

The second level of organization that guides eating disorder actions is internal psychological processes, which include the cognitive and emotional schemata that steer eating disorder behaviors. For example, part of Jody's emotional distress about the final exam may have been related to the potential for a poor grade to threaten her identity as a high-achiever. These kinds of thoughts and their implications for her self-concept bring about negative feelings judged to be unbearable to Jody, and she becomes motivated to engage in practical or functional steps directed toward the goal of finding respite from the distress.

The final level of organization guiding the eating disorder action is that of manifest behaviors, which includes automatic psychological and physiological processes like habits, structural supports, skills, or biology. Using the example above, Jody's binge may have been about finding relief or distraction from emotional distress (i.e., meaning), steered in part by her beliefs about herself and how tolerable the emotions felt (i.e., internal processes), and guided by having a limited repertoire of strategies for regulating negative emotion, the physiological effects of having restricted her food intake all day, as well as a family history positive for eating disorders. At the level of manifest behavior, all of these physiological and unconscious psychological processes are understood to coalesce into the action of Jody making sure her parents were not around and then going to the kitchen to search the

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<sup>1</sup> Please note, the names and scenarios used for illustration are made-up. If the stories bear similarity to actual people or events, it is coincidental.

fridge and pantry for binge food. Once spotting a desired food and consuming the first bites, the eating process becomes somehow unstoppable for Jody for a while. Understanding of eating disorder actions is informed by processes occurring at all three levels, but far greater attention is given to the steering processes at the level of meaning which hold the greatest resonance with the adolescent's actual world and his or her everyday thinking about life.

Another important aspect of contextual action theory is the social embeddedness of actions. Attending to the goals of actions for understanding will not only point to personally meaningful outcomes importance to the adolescent, but will almost always include important others. Thus, eating disorder actions are viewed as joint actions involving people and circumstances in the adolescent's social system. For example, by making Jody's permission to attend the senior weekend camp-out contingent upon her exam grade, her parents may have been hoping to motivate and reward their daughter for achieving her best, not realizing Jody was already felt a great deal of pressure to do well.

Contextual action theory maintains people are always goal-directed in their behaviors. However, it recognizes that they often participate in projects or careers in which they may not have full awareness of the goals. In the example above, Jody may not yet understand the larger meaning of her binging and purging in her life and her parents may not realize pretending not to notice their daughter's unusually large consumption of food represents a joint eating disorder action.

When taken independently, skipping meals, taking laxatives, eating in private, measuring and weighing food, compulsive weighing and calorie counting, or always being 'out' during family meal times can all be understood as goal-directed eating disorder actions. However, when strung together, they represent a set of actions sharing a common goal. The construct of *project* in action theory allows actions sharing a common goal to be extended over longer periods of time. In this way, an eating disorder is conceptualized in action theory as a meaningful project in the adolescent's life. The action theoretical concepts and assumptions outlined above show how an adolescent may come to find eating disorder actions a solution to problems in his or her life.

When an eating disorder project extends across a long-period of time, taking on a significant place in the individual's life, the construct of *career* can be applied. For some individuals, the outcomes of their eating disorder project, such as social isolation, the loss of relationships, hospitalization, preoccupation with calorie counting and weight, and being in a constant state of low energy and concentration may eventually be construed as unsatisfying or unwanted outcomes such that they begin to consider other means to reach the goals to which they are striving. For others, the eating disorder project may bring these unwanted outcomes, but it may also come to be part of something much more personally significant, such as an identity project. When a series of significant life projects, for example, eating disorder project and identity project, coalesce overtime, the construct of career becomes relevant.

**Table 13.1** Levels of action organization and corresponding explanatory models

Levels of action organization	Explanatory models
Social and personal meaning	Socio-cultural and interpersonal theory
Internal psychological processes	Intrapersonal models, including cognitive and emotional theory
Manifest behavior	Genetic, physiological, and neurobiological theory

## Contextual Action Theory as a Tool in Counseling for Adolescent Eating Disorders

### *Care Across Eating Disorders*

Regardless of the type of eating disorder the adolescent has, treatment will always begin with a comprehensive assessment of physical, psychological, and social needs, including the risk self-harm (Katzman et al. 2010). Because of the physiological risks associated with eating disorders, family physicians or pediatricians must be involved in the initial assessment. The treatment team should consist of a dietician, psychiatrist, counselor, family, and physician, and all should be in clear agreement regarding who is responsible for monitoring the adolescent's progress in all domains of functioning (Katzman et al. 2010). Treatment in an outpatient setting is preferable (APA 2006; NICE 2004). However, if there is significant deterioration in the adolescent's physical or psychological well-being, a more intensive form of treatment should be sought, such as day-treatment or inpatient programs.

At the outset of the counseling work, the family and the adolescent should be given information and psycho-education on the nature, course, and treatment options for the eating disorder. The action theory framework is a convenient schema for counselors to use when helping families arrive at a practical and meaningful understanding of the eating disorder. Research is clear that eating disorders are complex conditions with a multifactorial nature and many explanatory models exist (Striegel-Moore and Bulik 2007). The levels of action organization in the action theory framework can make sure one explanatory model is not inappropriately emphasized over others.

Once again, the levels of organization include (1) the goal or action level at which steering processes occur and social meaning is constructed, (2) the action step level at which most control processes occur and which is described in functional terms addressing internal and external psychological processes, and (3) the level of action elements at which regulation processes occur and which is described in physical terms. Table 13.1 shows how the levels of organization correspond with some of the major explanatory models for eating disorders.

The action framework directs a counselor's attention to the three levels of action organization, and in doing so integrates explanatory models concerned with context

and social processes (e.g., family environment, social resources, culture, and the media), the intrapersonal processes (e.g., emotions or cognitive biases and errors), and finally functional processes related the role of action elements mostly defined in physical terms such as behaviors, biological processes, or even genetics (e.g., medical, behavioral or neurobiological models). The levels help the counselor see the commonalities of these models and how to work them together into one truly multifactorial model that is neither oversimplified nor overwhelming (Young et al. 2011).

Clinical assessment for the purpose of treatment planning is an on-going activity in counseling, and when action theory is the meta-framework, the counselor is primed to gather information and assess the eating disorder and the family's concerns from multiple perspectives that correspond with the levels of action organization. The levels of action organization serve as an outline of sorts for asking questions and assessing functioning related to medications, developmental stage, family history of eating disorders, eating habits and routines and physical safety, to beliefs about dieting, eating disorders or body shape and weight, to what personal or social meaning the eating disorder has come to hold for the adolescent and the family.

## **A Contextual Action Response to Key Processes in Treatment**

When eating disorder behavior is understood as a joint systemic process in its short-term, medium-term, and long-term form by looking for the intended or assumed goal, a functional, temporal, and meaningful perspective for the conceptualization of treatment processes emerges. The functional, temporal, and meaningful perspective emerges because the action framework directs clinical attention to the motivations or goals of the family's eating disorder actions, whether it is actual eating disorder actions like the adolescent avoiding meals, or responses by family members to the eating disorder, such as a sibling feeling neglected and acting out or the parents arguing over appropriate consequences if the adolescent with anorexia fails to gain weight.

Attending to short, medium, and long-term goals of family members also ensures the eating disorder actions are understood in the context of the family's everyday experiences. In the illustration above, we entered Jody's actual world at the levels of meaning, emotions, cognitions, behavior and relationships, looking to the goals of her actions for understanding. Here again, a real strength of contextual action framework is how naturally it leads to a nonpathologizing and nonblaming conceptualization that emphasizes hope for change. Interwoven within this conceptualization is the assumption that people have the capacity for self-direction and are involved in a constant process of becoming.

### ***Weight Restoration as a Parent Project***

Helping the adolescent return to a normal pattern of eating that is free from binges and/ or purges, restricting, and other compensatory actions to off-set caloric intake is a priority for any therapeutic approach. However, each approach varies in the degree to which weight restoration and normalization of eating is emphasized. FBT focuses on weight restoration to the exclusion of other issues in the beginning, while most CBT approaches elect to work on eating and weight goals concurrent with other issues.

When a contextual action theory framework is used, some of the core features of weight restoration in FBT can be maintained, such as dealing with the family in a sincere but grave manner, taking a history of how the eating disorder has been affecting each family member, educating the family about the seriousness of the disorder and the difficulty of recovering, and charging the parents with the task of weight restoration. However, the use of behavioral principles of change in FBT to normalize eating habits and restore weight must be broadened to incorporate a view of human behavior that more closely fits with action theory, and perhaps how most counselors and clients typically understand human behavior.

The action construct of project, that is, the series of actions sharing a common goal over a mid-length amount of time, can be used to conceptualize the adolescent's weight restoration and normalization of eating habits. For a time, the weight restoration project replaces the eating disorder project that had been practiced in the family before the treatment. The parents' planning of the weekly meal schedule, the preparation of meals, the action of eating meals with the adolescent, and the corresponding post-meal support activities may be considered weight restoration actions, and several meals and post-meal support activities over time constitute the weight-restoration project.

By viewing weight restoration as a joint, goal-directed project between the parents, the counselor can target processes in the weight-restoration project at the level of personal and social meaning as goal directed, at the level of internal and manifest action and project steps, and at the level of action and project elements monitored in their physical form as behavior. These ideas are illustrated in the following example. Coincidentally Colin has been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, and with guidance and support from his counselor, Colin's parents have agreed to temporarily take charge of his eating. Together his parents have planned a menu for each meal and every snack many days in advance. They have agreed to present Colin with eating goals that are easy to achieve, and have established the ground-rules in advance. For example, Colin may be in the kitchen during meal preparing, but if it leads to a debate, he will only receive one warning before he must leave the kitchen. Colin's parents understand that maintaining unity in their effort is key, including agreement about things like portion sizes, handing of disagreements with Colin, and setting firm and consistent expectations for the completion of all meals. Colin's weight begins to increase, but after a few weeks into to the weight restoration project, it levels off and the counselor checks in with his parents about the project. It



soon comes to light that some inconsistency has developed in how Colin's parents are following through on the completion of each meal where his mother has been permitting him to stop eating before finishing all the food. Informed by the action framework, the counselor is prepared to address the problem at all three levels of action organization. At the lower levels of action organization, where the action control and action regulation occur, the counselor reminds the parents about the principles of behavioral change, and the consequences of variant patterns of reinforcement. However, the counselor is also interested in processes occurring at the levels of goal and steering processes, and most importantly, in the meaning behind the mother's action. When asked, Colin's mother shares that she believes her own struggles with weight, dieting, and poor body image have brought about her son's eating disorder. Whenever she demands Colin eat food she herself refuses to eat, she feels like a hypocrite, and allows Colin to leave the table without finishing the meal in order to lessen the feelings of guilt she experiences.

**Addressing food refusal** When actions is understood as goal-directed and meaningful, while guided by unconscious behavioral or biological processes, the idea in FBT of depicting the adolescent as out of control in regards to thinking and feelings about food has to be dealt with differently. The counselor would still want to motivate the parents to remain steadfast in the weight restoration project despite resistance from the adolescent, but would go about it by helping them understand their adolescent's opposition.

In Colin's situation, the counselor could use the levels of action organization to explain that when asked to consume a food or food-group he has labeled 'bad', Colin is going to be feel panicky, frightened, and battle hard against it. These intense bad feelings about the food are guided on one level by the belief these foods will make him fat, a state he associates with social exclusion and loss of identity. In the context of Colin's eating disorder project, these emotional and cognitive responses to food are purposeful processes meant to ensure he stays in control and on course for the goal of weight loss. At the level of meaning, these cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes represent how he has made sure he does not become the target of teasing and fat jokes, experiences he endured on a daily basis in elementary school. Being thin means being accepted by his peer group and feeling sure of himself. Thus, his weight loss project is closely linked to his identity project as well as to his project of not being hurt emotionally by his peers. The action of food restriction has become not only reassuring, but also rewarding for its role in the service of his ultimate goal. In Colin's mind, the personal and social cost of being fat is so undesirable and aversive that he has developed not just an intense emotional response to the food, but possibly even an automatic negative physiological aversion to the food itself. These negative cognitions, emotions, and behaviors constitute some of the processes that have been steering, controlling, and regulating his eating disorder actions.

Understanding the goal-directed nature of their son's refusal to eat not only gives meaning to his opposition, but cultivates empathy and understanding that the parents may use to guide their own actions in the weight-restoration project. Understanding

their son's opposition to eating does not change the potency of the behavioral tactics Colin's parents are using to re-feed him. Consequences for failing to gain weight, rewards for gaining, an attitude of nonnegotiation and zero-tolerance for debate about food, or planning post-meal activities to distract from the discomfort of the process are all behavioral strategies that can co-exist with the idea of Colin's eating disorder as goal-directed and meaningful.

**Addressing other treatment process issues** Finally, it is important to discuss how the action framework holds value for the counselor wishing to address weight restoration or disorganized eating patterns concurrent to other issues, as might be the case when a cognitive-behavioral approach is employed. An action theory response always assumes there are alternative means to achieving the goals valued by the adolescent other than the eating disorder. An adolescent might belong to a family where fitness and physical achievement is highly valued, and where thinness has become equated with parental recognition, approval, and acceptance. Because eating disorder actions are embedded in a social context, the actions are socially influenced and steered. This means others (e.g., parents, siblings, counselors, etc.) have opportunity to interrupt the development of the eating disorder by influencing long and short term goals. The adolescent's goal of making her parents proud and to feel their support is normal and good, but eating disorder goals working in the service of these higher-order goals are not. In this situation, the counselor may work with the family to help them see the problems created for their daughter when fitness is the only currency she sees for connection and affirmation. Together the family can learn about and experiment with new ways of affirming one another's value in the family.

From the perspective of action theory, eating disorders develop over time through a series of steps, like goal setting, planning, and developing strategies. As such, there are possibilities for intervention at any moment of the sequence. Any action in an eating disorder project can be replaced by an alternative action. Here again, the three levels of action organization represent perspectives on the eating disorder action that a counselor can use to guide interventions. The following vignette illustrates this point.

Rebecca is a former national dance champion originally suffering from the restricting subtype of anorexia nervosa, but who has recently experienced a diagnostic drift to bulimia nervosa. At the level of meaning, Rebecca's eating disorder represents a quest for personal value that she last experienced through her identity as an accomplished and highly successful dancer. Rebecca's goal of feeling a sense of self-worth and value is highly meaningful, and its achievement is related in important ways to other projects in her life. However, the eating disorder is an elusive way of achieving this goal.

At the level of meaning, the counselor may work with Rebecca to identify other joint projects of value that might also confer this sense of personal value. For example, Rebecca may have a relationship project with her mother and younger sister that has been neglected to make room for the eating disorder project. At the level of action steps and internal processes, Rebecca and her counselor may investigate whether she has adopted the cognitive error of overvaluing body shape

and weight when inferring personal value (Fairburn 2008; Vitousek and Hollon 1990). The counselor may work with her to identify the sequence of the key action steps in the relevant actions and projects. Finally, at the level of the physical definition of the manifest behavior and the regulation processes, the counselor may work with Rebecca and her parents on several tasks. For example, they may plan practical ways the family can help distract Rebecca from urges to binge and purge, such as being available to talk, to go out for coffee or take walks with her, or helping to create an easy, relaxed state during food shopping, intake, and digestion.

**Addressing counseling process issues** Attending to the goal of the eating disorder action for understanding also carries implications for understanding and working with counseling process issues in addition to some of the specific treatment processes outlined above. Treatment engagement and the development of a strong working relationship are particularly important in counseling families for eating disorders. The action framework can be especially useful in responding to both of these issues.

As mentioned above, the action framework leads the counselor to expect and search for a plurality of motivations (e.g., the reasons for rather than causes of behavior). This not only situates the counselor to ensure his or her approach engages adolescents and their families within their socially constructed realities, and in a way that is contextually meaningful, but naturally steers counseling work away from unhelpful speculation about causal processes. In this way, the action framework can acknowledge and respond to parents' search for understanding the eating disorder, but in a way that does not confer blame, which can delay or even derail treatment.

Second, counselors who use action theoretical concepts are likely to achieve better congruence with the adolescent's own subjective understanding of the reasons for eating disorder actions. It stands to reason that a better congruence between models for understanding and the adolescent's experience are related to a better working alliance (Michel and Valach 1997). This is not a small matter in the treatment of adolescent eating disorders, as it is common for this population to be ambivalent about treatment, which is especially the case with anorexia nervosa (Lock 2010). An advantage of the teleonomical orientation of action theory is that movement or progress in counseling is not contingent upon the adolescent or family coming to agreement with the counselor regarding a conceptualization of the problem informed by professional theory. Assuming the eating disorder actions are meaningful and goal-directed poises the counselor to address and enter the adolescent's world in a very pragmatic way. For example, a young person may explain her calorie counting and food restricting as something she does to lose weight. However, the goal of weight loss in her life is about a number of things far more meaningful, perhaps feeling valuable, feeling self-confident, or experiencing a sense of personal power, all of which may easily become the subject of counseling whether the adolescent or the family believes he or she has an eating disorder.

Finally, the action theory perspective helps the counselor understand the importance of subsuming the counseling process under the joint project of the client's healthy eating. Understanding the counseling process in this way does not eliminate the diagnosis or retrain the client. Rather, it supports clients in their projects centered on the project of healthy eating with its different stages, project steps or sub-projects, of which re-gaining weight might be one.

## **Contextual Action Theory as a Tool for Defining Counseling Outcomes**

The gaining and/ or maintenance of a healthy weight, the resumption of regular menstruation, normalization of eating patterns, and the elimination of bingeing and purging are common benchmarks of a successful outcome in the treatment of eating disorders. Although these outcomes are important, the action theory framework can also be useful in establishing outcomes for treatment that both the adolescent and the family can actively begin working towards in the process of counseling.

When an adolescent is dealing with an eating disorder, many developmental projects that are normally a priority during this time of life are put on hold. For example, there might be the adolescent's independence project, his or her peer and dating projects, academic projects, activity projects such as sports teams, music, and drama, as well as vocational projects. All of these activities can be understood as goal-directed actions, or intentional activities undertaken by the adolescent individually or with important others in their lives. The resumption and quality of these other important projects represent a meaningful way of defining treatment outcomes. Action theory also provides a number of criteria to assess life and health facilitating actions and projects which are used as outcome criteria of counseling and therapy (Young and Valach 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Contextual action theory is a practical and comprehensive framework that counselors can use to identify, conceptualize, and work with the key processes that emerge when counseling families for adolescent eating disorders. Action theory is based on concepts and language that address intentionality and motivation, and so understanding of the adolescent's and the family's processes as goal-directed represents something far greater than a static formulation of the problem. It influences how the counselor works with the family and the adolescent in an on-going and systematic way throughout treatment. Finally, the organization of action, project, and career according to the three levels, that is, meaning, internal processes, and manifest behavior, makes the action theory framework a useful way for counselors to avoid

focusing on one of these levels to the exclusion of the others, a very useful tool in light of the complex nature of eating disorders.

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# Chapter 14

## Contextual Action Theory Framework in Counseling Families of Children with Disabilities

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The diagnosis of childhood disability can trigger a wide range of emotional and behavioral responses in parents and across the family system. Following initial responses to the diagnosis, while concurrently facing the emotional reality of the diagnosis, parents must undergo a process of adaptation to the various challenges uniquely associated with raising a child who has a disability and develop what we call an appropriate family project. Some of the challenges include increased caregiving demands, finding and obtaining early intervention services, modifying communication strategies, medical and educational decision making, working with professionals across a range of disciplines, learning about technological supports, working with the child to enhance developmental outcomes, and dealing with additional financial pressures. Beyond the caregiving, teaching, and search for services, there are also personal ramifications of having a child with a significant disability. A wealth of research suggests that having a child with disability can have significant consequences for the family well-being (Rosenbaum and Gorter 2011). Overall, the daily challenges and pressures of raising a child with a disability can negatively affect families' quality of life. In addition, parents of children with disabilities face increased stress (Gerstein et al. 2009) and elevated levels of depressive symptoms (e.g., Montes and Halterman 2007). At the same time, childhood disability can also lead to positive outcomes. For example, the experience of having a child with a disability can provide new insights into family priorities, and may provide a sense

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of purpose, evoke personal growth, and heighten family functioning and cohesion. The importance of a family's well-being in the lives and development of young children is widely acknowledged. The well-being of parents influences their ability to provide appropriate care and helps prevent negative outcomes for children (Goodman and Gottlieb 2002; Hernandez-Reif et al. 2000; Jones et al. 2000).

The recognition of the centrality of the family in the lives and development of young children (Dunst 2002; Turnbull and Turnbull 2001) urges professionals to support family strengths and needs in order to enhance the well-being of the child within the context of the family (Bailey and Bruder 2005; Bruder 2000).

Over the past decades, early intervention programs and community-based service organizations have increasingly adopted the principles of a family centered orientation for service delivery (Rosenbaum et al. 1998). Family centered orientation is both a method and philosophy of service delivery that highlights the role of the family in the child's life, and the importance of parents' accounts of their child's abilities and needs (King et al. 2004). In addition, it emphasizes the partnership between parents and service providers (Hostler 1994). Professionals' practices in family centered service are defined by simultaneous use of both relational and participatory resources (Dunst and Trivette 1996). Relational components include professional skills such as active listening, compassion, empathy, respect, a nonjudgmental approach, and a set of beliefs about parenting capabilities and competencies. Participatory components include practices that are individually tailored, flexible, and responsive to concerns and priorities of each family, and provide families with opportunities to be actively involved in decisions and choices, to collaborate with professionals, and to take actions targeting desired goals and outcomes (Bruder and Dunst 2008; Epps and Jackson 2000; Murray et al. 2000).

The family centered approach highlights the importance of parental involvement as a fundamental component of early intervention (Turnbull et al. 2007). Specifically, it is desired that parents collaborate with professionals to acquire knowledge and competencies that allow them to incorporate interventions with their children outside the therapy session, learn strategies to assist their children in attaining developmental milestones and competences, and help children manage their behavior during daily routines (Raikes et al. 2005). Turnbull et al. (2007) recommended that family members in family centered programs: (a) share responsibility and work collaboratively with professionals, (b) join professionals in developing appropriate outcomes, (c) share information routinely and collaboratively with professionals, and (d) access relevant information so they can make informed choices and decisions for their children.

While this philosophy and model for services has established the important role of families in their child's intervention services and of the parent-professional partnership, we suggest Contextual Action Theory (Valach et al. 2002) as a useful framework for understanding and enhancing the parent-professional joint work and collaboration. From a Contextual Action Theory perspective, parental involvement in early intervention is understood as intentional, goal-directed behaviors embedded in a social and relational context. This understanding transcends the narrow lens of parental involvement as a stable trait and individualistic action. It shifts the



focus to a joint dynamic process between the professional, parent, and child that is intentional and ongoing. Parents' goals are both prefigured and co-constructed through their joint interaction process with their children and professionals (Young and Valach 2004, 2008). Overall, it integrates the components of relations defining family centered services.

Contextual Action Theory allows professionals to access the complex parents' emotional cognitive, and communication processes. Often when the main elements of family centered services are summarized or discussed the necessity and the centrality of parents' emotions and cognitions that are embodied within ongoing individual and joint intentional actions are neglected. By simply following an intervention plan and goals, without inviting and considering parents' internal processes and meaning, it is usually insufficient to make progress and achieve the goals. With use of the action-theory framework, professionals acknowledge the parents' emotions and thoughts surrounding their child's disabilities, and seek to explore how the parents interpret their role in their child's intervention. Contextual Action theory as a framework for working with families provides a way for professionals to increase their understanding of parents' action from multiple perspectives (i.e., manifest behavior, internal cognitive-emotive processes, and social meaning). In addition it can contribute to professionals' practices of service delivery, and in particular, their interaction and collaboration with families while implementing a family centered approach.

Contextual Action Theory is viewed as an epistemology for understanding human activity in context (Young et al. 2005). Contextual Action theory contains a system of knowing that underlines the notion that knowledge and meaning are provoked and constructed through action (Young et al. 2005), and as such, it is an alternative approach to observing parents' and children's behaviors in the context of their daily life, looking at the processes through which parents construct meaning. It contributes to the understanding of how people organize themselves, both individually and jointly, around the task of parenting a child with a disability. It also extends the notion of the parent-professional relationship to one that focuses on construction of meaningful processes and outcomes through joint actions and projects (Zaidman-Zait and Young 2008).

Contextual Action Theory can be considered an integrative framework—a specific way of understanding human emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational processes. It is based on the premise that human behavior is intentional and goal directed, and that is the way people understand their own and other's behavior (Valach et al. 2002). When actions coalesce into a common goal over a length of time, they can be identified as a project. In addition, goal-directed sets of actions of two socially related individuals generate joint projects (Valach et al. 2002). Contextual Action Theory integrates two fundamental features of effective early intervention services. The first feature is based on supportive relationships between the family's members and the professionals, as well as the professionals and the organization they work for. The second feature is the adaptation of goal orientation that encompasses both joint goal setting and the pursuit of meaningful, client-selected goals (King 2009). In summary, Contextual Action Theory provides a new way to

understand the complexity and intentionality of parents' and children's joint action in the context of the rehabilitation and intervention process in collaboration with professionals (Zaidman-Zait and Young 2008).

In the current chapter, we explore the ways in which Contextual Action Theory can make a novel contribution to intervention with families of children with disabilities. First, we present a hypothetical narrative of a family of a child with a disability who is taking part in an intervention service delivery program. Next, we discuss the case as an example for embedding a Contextual Action Theory framework in early intervention services for families of children with disabilities. Specifically, we ask the following questions: *What is early intervention with families of children with disabilities about? What meaning does it have for parents and professionals, and towards what end does it lead?* Last, we present possible steps and suggestions for implementing Contextual Action Theory in practice.

## Family Narrative from an Action Theory Framework

The narrative of a mother, presented next, is hypothetical case. However, it is based on many narratives we have collected from parents of children with multiple disabilities.

Karen and Steve have two children, a daughter, age 4 and a son, age 6. Their daughter, Adrienne, was born prematurely at 25 weeks gestation. She sustains a bilateral profound hearing loss, and was also diagnosed with cerebral palsy at 12 months. She was not able to eat orally, and was fed through a gastrostomy feeding tube. Adrienne received hearing aids at 3 months, shortly after her hearing loss was confirmed through auditory brainstem response testing (ABR). She underwent surgery to receive bilateral cochlear implants at 13 months. Karen and Steve considered the decision to implant carefully. They met with the members of the cochlear implant team at their local children's hospital, which included an audiologist, surgeon, psychologist, and speech-language pathologist. They searched and read many Internet websites on cochlear implants and hearing loss, and sought the opinions of other parents of deaf children through Internet forums, groups, and blogs.

Karen's and Steve's goal for Adrienne was that she be able to communicate verbally; at the same time, if she was not successful with that approach, they would consider sign language. They sought out services from an early intervention program that focused on the development of auditory-verbal skills for children with hearing loss. The auditory-verbal therapist who was assigned to them worked with Karen by discussing the family's typical daily schedule, and identifying times and activities during the day when language stimulation techniques could be incorporated naturally into daily routines and activities.

In addition to auditory-verbal therapy, Adrienne also received occupational therapy, physical therapy, and feeding therapy, each for 1 h/week. Karen followed a similar approach to each therapy, taking notes during the therapy sessions to help her recall the techniques used by the therapists, and keeping a journal at

home to track Adrienne's progress in physical skills, language skills, and feeding skills.

Adrienne's multiple needs and frequent therapies affected the relationships within the family. Karen felt guilty that she was not spending enough time with Jacob, her son. In addition, the financial costs affected the family's well-being. The upgrade to a new cochlear implant processor was not covered by their insurance, and the family had to pay thousands of dollars out of pocket. Karen quit her job to stay home and care for Adrienne in order to meet her medical needs and attend her frequent appointments. This required the family to live on one income. Karen explained that her marriage sometimes felt more like a "business relationship than a romantic relationship", and although they tried to spend time alone together, she and Steve were reluctant to leave the children in the care of others, partly out of concern for Adrienne's medical needs, and partly because they feel guilty about spending money on themselves when it could go toward paying bills. The couple received little support from other family members. Although Steve's parents were sympathetic to their needs, they were unable to help, as they lived in a different region of the country. Karen's parents lived within an hour's drive. However, Karen did not feel that she could rely on her parents for help with the children. She indicated that she and Steve had different values than her parents, and described her mother as being "harsh". Her parents, she said, are uncomfortable with Adrienne's disabilities, and Karen did not trust her mother to provide adequate care and supervision for the children.

Although these challenges existed, Karen and Steve were buoyed by their spiritual faith and by their church community. Karen and Steve attended services regularly, and found solace in scripture reading and prayer. Members of the church invited Karen and the children for play dates, made meals for the family during Adrienne's surgeries, and were a source of sympathy and emotional support for the family.

The above narrative portrays some of the flavor of parenting a child with a disability and the ways in which parents are involved in the daily intervention and promotion of their child's development. It also indicates a number of important dimensions of parenting children with disabilities that can be analyzed from a Contextual Action Theory. First, parents are actively involved in the rehabilitation process of their children. Second, parents engage in day-to-day planned behaviors over time, envisioning an end-result for their child. Third, these behaviors have meaning for parents and are embedded within parents' internal processes, including emotions and cognitions. Fourth, parents' actions do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, both parents and their children engage together in activities. In addition, others (e.g., professionals, family members) are also involved in these processes. Last, the child's intervention program is embedded and linked to other on-going family projects.

The perspective of Contextual Action Theory can be applied to this narrative to understand the intervention process, the parenting experiences and processes, and context. As evident in the above narrative, the mother and father were involved in several individual and joint projects that intertwine. The most salient

project was to promote their daughter's communication and physical abilities, in order for the daughter eventually to be mainstreamed in society as much as possible. The father saw his role as provider for the family, and left much of the child care and therapies to his spouse. The mother participated in focused and planned activities with her daughter, and drew others into this project, for example, professionals and the child's father. The mother's dedication to the project was steered by hopes and expectations for the child. In addition, this project was relevant to her parenting identity and values, which was about making a full commitment to her children. At the level of functional steps, the mother engaged in time-consuming tasks to make informed decisions, such as seeking information about the best intervention approaches, finding and scheduling therapies, and working with her child on communication, motor skills, and feeding skills. With regards to promoting her child's outcome, she also had a joint project with the professionals who were involved in her child's rehabilitation. For example, the mother intentionally chose the auditory verbal therapy approach, which focuses on developing listening and spoken language skills for children with hearing loss. At the level of meaning, this contributed to the establishment of a cooperative joint project of the mother and the professional. They met weekly for 1 h. In each session they discussed Adrienne's progress, Karen's observations in the home environment, and worked on two to three specific auditory or language skills per session. This ongoing communication enhanced the jointly constructed project.

In Karen's case, an example of a joint project between the parent and professional was to bring Adrienne's language skills to the level of her same-age hearing peers. The language goals were written into the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), a document that is used by early intervention agencies to establish goals for the child and family, and to track progress toward those goals. As part of Adrienne's therapy, Karen was asked to videotape herself playing with Adrienne at home, and incorporate some of the therapist's suggestions to increase Adrienne's vocabulary. However, the play session did not go as Karen had hoped. Adrienne was highly distracted and unengaged in the play activity. Karen brought the videotape to the therapist and expressed her frustration with the activity. The auditory-verbal therapist viewed the tape with her, and used the "self-confrontation procedure" with Karen, that is, stopping the videotape at regular intervals and asking Karen to comment on her thoughts, feelings, and actions at the time of the interaction. In this process, Karen watched herself playing with her daughter while the therapist directed her attention to the actions between the two of them. Through this process Karen realized how Adrienne was disengaging from play when the language tasks became too difficult. Together, the therapist and Karen worked toward their joint project of increasing Adrienne's vocabulary by discussing how to follow Adrienne's lead, allowing her to choose the play activity, while targeting the specific words they wanted her to produce. Self-confrontation procedures in therapy can be a useful tool in promoting interventions that are based on understanding of action, including goals, plans, and strategies.

The relationship between Karen and the auditory–verbal therapist was open, honest and emotionally sensitive, and supported Karen’s ongoing coping with for the care of a child with multiple disabilities. The therapist’s goal was to educate and guide Karen on ways to expand Adrienne’s language skills. This project related to the therapist’s own project as her identity as a family centered therapist. Karen’s goal was to learn these therapy methods to use them in the home during their daily family activities and routine, that is, family meals, play time, bath time, and so forth. The parent–professional joint project enhanced Karen’s skills in stimulating her daughter’s language and auditory development, making her more confident in her parenting, and giving her hope, as she observed her daughter make progress.

Another ongoing project was the relationship project between Karen and Steve. This project was about reconstructing their relationship, and restoring the more romantic relationship that they used to have before their children were born. The project was emotionally steered by both parents regretting that their relationship had become business-oriented due to the daily demands of caring for their children, especially Adrienne. The functional step they took was to attempt to spend more intimate time together without the children; however, this project was impeded by the family’s financial challenges and Karen’s guilt and fear of leaving her children. Financially, the family was faced with bills for Adrienne’s therapies and medical care that were not completely covered by insurance, so they were reluctant to spend money at restaurants or entertainment activities together. Secondly, as part of her parent identity, Karen felt conflicted about leaving Adrienne with a baby sitter, fearing that a complication might arise with the feeding tube.

Another ongoing relationship project is with the couple’s son. Karen felt that she neglected him at times, due to the commitment of meeting Adrienne’s needs. She tried to include him in the Adrienne’s different intervention activities, but at the same time, it presented challenges and frustration both for her and for him. Jacob did not find interest in those activities, and it was more like interference than a shared activity. Karen found herself becoming impatient with Jacob.

In terms of resources, Karen turned to her mother to provide help by doing some activity with Adrienne so she could spend time with her son, but this turned out to be a highly conflictual situation in which Karen did not approve of the way her mother treated Adrienne. This also raised negative emotions such as anger and disappointment in her own relationship with her mother.

A positive resource for her parenting project (i.e., parenting a child with a disability) was her religious faith. Her faith in God helped Karen to construct a positive meaning around having a child with a disability. Karen believed that Adrienne was a blessing in their family’s life, and that God was teaching them to be patient and compassionate. In addition, the family often turned to members of their church for emotional support through prayer and expressed sympathy. This vignette provides a brief insight into a possible Contextual Action Theory informed formulation of the ongoing processes in the care of a child with a disability. However, Contextual Action Theory also provides an orderly schema for intervention.

## **Intervention Steps from Contextual Action Theory Perspective**

Young et al. (2011) identified primary therapeutic tasks from an action theory perspective including, creating and maintaining a working alliance, helping the client link therapy and life processes, helping the client identify systems and levels of projects and actions, helping the client to deal with emotion, and helping the client search for optimal goals, strategies, and regulation processes in his or her relevant on-going processes. These tasks are used as the basis for the following discussion of this case.

### ***Creating and Maintaining a Working Alliance***

In many early intervention programs, there is an emphasis on family centeredness. However, early intervention therapists and teachers typically receive little training in their preparation programs on the family centered approach versus the client-centered approach (Campbell et al. 2009). In order to work effectively with parents, it is important for professionals to identify and consider the goal-directed processes of the parents, and establish a joint project with them that on one end focuses on their relationships and on the other end focuses on the desired outcomes for the child and other on-going family's projects. Viewing this working alliance through the lens of action theory as a goal-directed process and joint project can help guide the professional's role and decision-making while supporting the family. A successful joint project, in which both parent and professional are regarded as equal partners, invites opportunities from both parties for narratives and feedback. Partners can then engage in the goal regulation process, to alter steps toward the goals, or change the goals.

Embedded in the identification of the parent's goals, it is important to invite the parent's internal process, that is, cognition, emotion, and meaning, to the dialogue. Parents of children with disabilities typically experience grief, anger, and fear for their child's safety and future. These internal processes may inhibit or spur the parent's involvement in the intervention and therapies and care for the child. Acknowledgement of internal processes will help guide the professional in finding resources for the parent. For example, in Karen's case, each therapy session began with a time for "check in", when the auditory-verbal therapist asked Karen how the week went, what therapy activities she and the child practiced, and how life was for the family, in general. In light of their on-going parent-professional relationship project, Karen felt comfortable to ask questions and report on the success or difficulties of the various therapy tasks she and Adrienne had engaged in. She also expressed specific on-going emotions such as her fear about the transition from early intervention to kindergarten. As a result of the on-going communication and the elicitation of internal processes, the therapist referred Karen to a workshop on navigating the public school system, which gave Karen the opportunity to learn ways to advocate for her

daughter, and provided her with contacts to other parents. The workshop experience helped allay Karen's fears, and gave her more confidence. By engaging Karen in the steering process of her on-going projects by inviting her thoughts about the therapy, as well as inviting her internal processes, the parent/professional working alliance was strengthened.

### *Linking Therapy and Life Processes*

Inviting parents' extensive personal and familial narratives bridge early intervention services to ongoing meaningful life processes. This practice also recognizes the importance of embedding steps toward goals and projects within the context of the family's daily life. It also aligns closely with early intervention programs that focus on delivering services in the child's natural environment, such as the home or daycare, rather than the clinical environment (Childress 2004; Dunst and Bruder 2002) and recognizes the importance of therapy to daily life and family on-going routines for the purpose of generalization and maintenance of treatment outcomes, and building contextually appropriate intervention (Lucyshyn et al. 2004).

Narrative and feedback from the parent guides the professional by suggesting ways in which functional steps toward the goals or desired outcomes for the child can be incorporated into the family's other on-going projects. In the current case example, the auditory-verbal therapist learned about Karen's on-going projects and embedded them in the intervention processes. In addition, the therapist, who saw Adrienne and Karen at a clinic, frequently asked questions about Karen's daily routine, identifying functional steps she employed to reach her goals, and brainstorming with Karen language-based activities that she could engage with Adrienne. For example, as part of Karen's project to maintain a "typical" family life routine and not to be overwhelmed by intervention demands, it was Karen's goal to leave time to relax and play with both of her kids as a "typical" family, rather than performing the role of teacher throughout the whole day. The auditory-verbal therapist worked with Karen on planning ways to highlight vocabulary during play, so that the joint project of increasing Adrienne's language skills could be addressed in a less structured way that did not conflict with Karen's other goal of having fun "normal" shared relaxed time with her children.

In addition, by recognizing her relationship project with her other son, the therapist could plan different activities at the home setting that invite the brother's participation. Recognizing the range of on-going projects in Karen's life helped to make the therapy process meaningful, optimized her engagement and involvement in her child's therapy, and enhanced her cooperative on-going joint project with the therapist. From the therapist's perspective, it allowed her to support the mother's project and to tailor a flexible therapy plan that potentially could be changed as new projects emerge in the family context. The importance of linking therapy to life processes also aligns with ecocultural theory perspective (Weisner 2002), which posits that families actively construct activity settings that are compatible with their

children's characteristics, consistent with family goals and values, and sustainable over time. Linking therapy to life processes privileges parents' epistemological positions by enabling them to reflect on their personal and social meaning and their thoughts and feelings through their intentional engagement in projects. Parents implicitly or explicitly can answer the question, "What is this (action) about?" (Young et al. 2007). Parents understand and engage with their children in joint activities that they consider goal directed and meaningful, and they interpret their own and their child's behavior as intentional and goal directed (Zaidman-Zait and Young 2008). Action theory integrates meaning, cognitive processes, and behavior in a way that is close to the human experience and is, thus, highly usable in intervention. It can help families understand the intervention process, as it is situated within daily contexts, as well as understand how ongoing actions serve to construct successful outcomes over time.

### *Identifying Systems and Levels of Projects and Action*

A central task of the intervention is the identification of the systems, goals, and projects in the family's life. Parents' engagement and involvement in the intervention while working with professionals take place within the generation of ongoing goals, functional steps, and elements. This process is also been regulated by the child's behavior and characteristics and the parent's available resources and internal processes. This goal regulation process occurs over time and moment-by-moment during parent-professional action and parents-child ongoing action.

Parent narratives are an inherent part of the ongoing identification processes and are also helpful in generating a good parent-professional relationship by providing an avenue to honor client perspective and uniqueness. Parent narratives also provide a framework in which issues and related emotions can be addressed. However, this approach does not rely simply on narrative; it also relies on observations. Hence we recommend using observations and the "self-confrontation procedure" to facilitate the identification of on-going action in family interactions. Videotaping parent-child interactions has been used by speech-language therapists in communication training, such as the Hanen Program®, to coach parents in adapting their conversation to facilitate language development in their child (Pennington and Thomson 2007). However, Contextual Action Theory takes this technique a step further, and examines not only the use of language facilitation techniques, but also the meaning and internal processes of the communication interaction. A video recording can be taken by the parents while interacting with their child at home or during a therapy session. This recording then can be jointly reviewed by the parent and the professional, with the parent stopping the videotape whenever she wants to comment on what is taking place. Alternatively, the therapist stops the videotape at regular intervals and explicitly encourages the parent to express her thoughts, feelings, and comment on her actions at the time of the interaction. The video recall interview is



the time best suited to address the parents' feelings and emotions, particularly those that are differentiated and processed cognitively and through language (Greenberg 2004). However, the professional must also be attentive to preconscious, physiological experiences that may manifest themselves in non-verbal behavior. For example, grabbing a toy from Adrienne's hand indicated that Karen was not following Adrienne's lead. Ongoing attention to emotions and feelings contribute significantly to relationship building between the parent and the professional.

The identification of systems, goals, and projects, in turn helps the professional and parent to distinguish what problems to address, as well as what resources that the parent has, or may need, in order to solve the problems (Young et al. 2011). For example, the auditory-verbal therapist suggested that Karen place Adrienne in a half-day preschool 4 days/week to increase her exposure to peers with typically developing language. However, with three other weekly therapy appointments for Adrienne, as well as the cost of the preschool, Karen stated that she did not feel that she could do this, as it conflicted with her goal to spend more time with her son, as well as her joint project with her husband to focus on paying down the family's debt. The therapist and Karen then discussed other cost-free ways to increase Adrienne's exposure to peers, such as church-based children's groups, and play dates with the children of friends and relatives. By identifying the family's projects and goals, the professional and parent were able to construct together a viable solution to provide actions toward their joint project of increasing Adrienne's language skills. Considering the availability of resources (knowledge and skills) for the projects is crucial in the intervention process. Parents' actions can be enabled or limited by structural resources and constraints and can influence the progress of projects over time. Identifying systems, goals, and projects suggests the need to localize problems and successes, as well as facilitative and inhibitive processes at the appropriate level of action and project organization. Is there a problem with the action goal? What are the steps to achieve it? To what extent does the detailed verbal and non-verbal behavior need correcting?

### *Addressing Emotions*

As mentioned earlier, when a child is diagnosed with a disability, parents typically experience a myriad of emotions, including grief, guilt, fear and anger. Emotions have an important role at different levels of parent-child joint actions (Young et al. 1997) and can steer both negative and positive processes. Hence it is important to explore parents' emotions as part of the intervention process. Professionals who work with the family of a child with special needs must be aware of these cycling emotions and be open to discussing the family's feelings about the child's exceptionalities, as well as their own emotions.

Emotions also influence meaning-making. For example, a parent's involvement in therapy activities can be driven by the joy of engaging with their child, and seeing

her progress toward established goals. On the other hand, frustrations around the child's lack of progress and undesirable behaviors pose a challenge for the project's progress. In addition, emotions function as a steering process, guiding and directing actions. Further, emotions also function in the self-regulation of behavior (Zaidman-Zait and Young 2008). Professionals may feel that they only have a limited amount of time with the child during their scheduled sessions, and may reluctant to use that time to invite the parent's narrative; however, it must be recognized that the family's emotions will influence the carry over therapeutic goals into the home environment; if the parent feels depressed, for example, he may avoid spending time with his child. Professionals who are aware of the parents' emotional state and their on-going projects can help the family frame their thoughts and feelings as part of the goal-directed process. For example, when Karen openly discussed with the auditory-verbal therapist her anger toward her mother for not being more nurturing, she recognized that her mother was, in fact, trying to be helpful by offering to take Adrienne so that Karen could spend more time with Jacob. This process led Karen to reconstruct her perspective and become more accepting of her mother's offer to help her. As described by Rosenbaum and Gorter (2011) as the 'generational sandwich', grandparental voices are another contextual factor that can powerfully influence parents of children with disabilities, and hence, should be asked about and understood. Addressing emotion also turns our attention to the emotional memories that are actualized in the current project and actions, such as feelings of guilt, incompetency, being stigmatized, or being punished, which may influence the client to act in a detrimental manner.

### ***Dealing with Suboptimal and Detrimental Actions and Projects***

Family counselors and early interventionists are frequently confronted with actions and projects in the family's lives that may be suboptimal or detrimental. Focusing on optimal goals and action plans may increase the parent's awareness of barriers that may be preventing progress, as well as guide a search for resources. For example, a joint project for Karen and Steve was to spend more time together, but they lacked the funds to hire a childcare provider who had experience with tube-feeding. When Karen raised this concern to one of Adrienne's therapists, he put her in contact with an organization that provided government-subsidized respite care for medically fragile children. This service, although only a few hours a week, provided Karen with a way to have some one-on-one time with her husband and other child. This postulate teaches us that clients might be engaged in detrimental actions and projects that they are unaware of. For example, Karen could not relax when she was away from Adrienne thinking that she could not trust the carer, and thus punished herself by not allowing herself to enjoy the time together with Steve.

## Conclusion

To summarize, adopting a Contextual Action Theory perspective that examines parents' behaviors in the context of their daily life is needed to improve professional practice with families of children with disabilities. We believe Contextual Action Theory offers potential as an established integrative and conceptual framework with a distinctive, relational view, on implementing family centered services and enhancing professionals' work with families. The theory can guide early intervention professionals in creating and maintaining parent-professional relationships and joint actions. Professionals can address the ongoing needs of the child and family by observing individual and joint actions, identifying systems and levels of projects and actions. Throughout the therapy process they can merge therapy actions and life processes, helping parents to recognize emotions and thoughts that they are experiencing, and helping them to establish optimal goals, strategies, and regulation processes to. This in turn will strengthen families by increasing their awareness of their own actions and goals, supporting their needs and enhancing their well being.

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# Chapter 15

## The Action of Mindfulness in Counseling

Brenda Yaari Dyer

Experiencing mindfulness, whether explicitly in a clinical intervention such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), or implicitly through the relationship between mindful clinician and client, can be seen as a process of paying attention to one's embodied experience in a curious and nonjudgmental way. In a therapeutic context, this process is relational, dialogical, and goal-directed: we pay kind attention to self and other in the midst of, and through, language-based relating. Thus, the joint action of mindfulness, while on one level experienced privately and individually, on another level, is constituted in the intersubjective space and is manifest in the words and behaviors of the dyad in dialogue. When we observe how mindfulness may be taught, learned, and experienced in a counseling relationship, it is possible to view mindfulness as an interpersonal phenomenon with goals, verbal and non-verbal behavioral elements, and social meanings—in other words, as a joint action and project. Understanding mindfulness from the contextual-action theoretical perspective helps to explain its potential role in counseling psychology, particularly in terms of the therapeutic relationship.

It can be said that mindfulness, defined as paying attention on purpose and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn 1990), is relevant to all the helping professions: counseling, medicine, social work, and education. This cultivation of attention, intention and nonjudgment appears to promote well-being (Baer 2003; Bishop 2002; Hoffman et al. 2010). Germer (2005a) classified mindfulness-oriented psychotherapy into three types: mindfulness-based therapy, in which mindfulness is taught formally through meditation exercises, the mindful therapist whereby mindfulness acts as a common factor, and mindfulness-informed therapy in which the underlying philosophical principles of mindfulness such impermanence and acceptance are taught indirectly through relational process. In this chapter, I take up the latter type identified by Germer, that of mindfulness-informed therapy. However, I also propose that not only are the philosophical principles of mindfulness taught through relational process, but also the components of mindfulness itself—attention, intention, and

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nonjudgment. The mindful counselor attends to the client's experience with compassionate curiosity, drawing the client into a joint attentional process, that is, a joint action, which we can call mindfulness. The therapeutic goal of this type of movement is that over time, the client becomes more and more able to relate to her own experience in the same kind, patient, attentive way that the counselor and client enact within session.

The negotiation of goals within the working alliance of counseling is an interesting process when the theory of change is an acceptance-based one such as in mindfulness-oriented counseling. The client may come to counseling with goals of eradicating what is painful or ugly in her life, assuming that in order to change, she needs to learn new ways to push away and get rid of the problem, whether these so-called problems are external, such as an annoying person, or internal, such as one's fear of that person. The client may be puzzled by the mindful counselor's invitation to move closer to what is painful and undesirable. In this chapter, I present a contextual action theoretical framework for mindfulness, and mindfulness-informed counseling first, and then demonstrate, through a clinical example, how the jointness of mindfulness-informed counseling action becomes manifest even when the counselor and client begin with different theories of and goals for change. In unpacking the vignette, contextual action theory is referenced as a tool for identifying the target processes of teaching and learning mindfulness, addressing the five counseling tasks highlighted by Young et al. (2011), and defining counseling outcomes. The relevance of contextual action theory for investigating relational, intersubjective psychotherapeutic processes is highlighted.

## **Mindfulness and Contextual Action Theory**

First of all, how do we construe mindfulness itself to be an action? Its ontology has eluded Buddhist scholars and Western psychological researchers alike. Western researchers have primarily understood and defined mindfulness as an individual cognitive, perceptual or affective trait, state, skill, or style (Bishop et al. 2004; Sternberg 2000; Teasdale et al. 1995, Davidson 2010). In a seminal outcome study by Kabat-Zinn et al. (1985) on the use of mindfulness in chronic pain management, mindfulness was defined as a "highly developed, coherent, systematic and multimodal utilization of attention" (p. 165). In extant literature, it is rare to view mindfulness in its simplest terms as an action. Indeed, a common image of a meditator would probably be a sedate contemplative rather than a person of action. Even more, some of the basic mindfulness exercises call for paying attention to one's current experience free of purpose.

A common conceptualization of mindfulness is as a set of mental skills or attitudes which are then applied to action. And indeed, one of the purposes of mindfulness meditation as it is practiced in various schools of Buddhism is the eventual cultivation of a particular kind of ethical action in our life, so-called "right action" and "right speech." Through mindfulness practice, we work to interrupt and eventually

undo harmful habitual thought and behavior patterns and thus gain liberation from the suffering caused by unconscious action. Through the contemplative practice of meditation, we prepare for a life of right action.

Another way of conceptualizing mindfulness, however, is not a separate mental attitude, or set of mental “skills”, that precedes action, but as an action itself, which includes not only behavior but thoughts, feelings and meaning. Phenomenologically, this has been taken up by Depraz et al. (2000) who refer to the *gesture* of mindfulness, which they describe as an emotional, cognitive, and physiological “leaning towards.” Not a mindful gesture, but the gesture of mindfulness; not a mindful action, but the action of mindfulness. This may seem like a moot philosophical point, but it becomes practically relevant when we turn to understanding how mindfulness may be constructed relationally in the actual process of counseling dialogue. The overt teaching of the “how” and “what” of mindfulness through verbal didactic instruction is one way mindfulness is taught and learned, as in the meditation instruction in MBSR and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), and the exercises of dialectical-behavior therapy (DBT). At the same time, I suggest that a complex, joint, and contingent intersubjective action of mindfulness may take place between the mindful counselor and the client in counseling dialogue,<sup>1</sup> which can be observed, described and understood through the lens of contextual action theory, and its associated qualitative method of inquiry, the action-project method.

At the core of contextual action theory is the ontological understanding of human experience being comprised of goal-oriented intentional action (Young et al. 2002, p. 213). Intentionality is also an important concept within Buddhist psychology, and a primary feature of mindfulness. In fact it is a factor that seems to bridge the various definitions of mindfulness. For example, Bishop et al. (2004) expanded on their operational definition of mindfulness, explaining that the first component, attention, is “an intentional effort to observe and gain a greater understanding of the nature of thoughts and feelings” and the second component, acceptance, involves “a conscious decision to abandon one’s agenda to have a different experience” (p. 236). Similarly, Germer (2005a) said that mindfulness always includes an intention to direct attention somewhere. He described the advanced practice of mindfulness, choiceless awareness, in which attention moves without attachment among the changing elements of experience: “Even choiceless awareness includes intention, in this case, the intention not to choose, but to stay aware of where our attention resides” (p. 16). In a compelling model of the mechanisms of mindfulness, Shapiro et al. (2006) posited intention as one of three main components. It may be useful to compare the place of intention in Buddhist and Western philosophy in order to investigate the possibility of mindfulness as, first and foremost, a phenomenon of intentionality.

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<sup>1</sup> I am positing that mindfulness may be enacted through counseling dialogue. It was observed to be enacted through the Dialogue and Inquiry component of MBSR, a dialogue between mindfulness teacher and participants which are typically conducted after participants do the formal meditation practices of the curriculum (Dyer 2011).



Olendzki (2005) contended that in order to understand mindfulness, one needs to understand the historical setting of mindfulness and its philosophical underpinnings in Buddhist psychology. He outlined the Buddhist understanding of the most elemental unit of human experience as comprised of five interdependent factors: contact between a sense organ and a sense object, the awareness of that object (consciousness), perception, feeling and intention.

According to Olendzki, the Buddhist meaning of intention “has to do with the attitude taken towards what is happening in experience” (p. 247). It is associated with *doing* rather than knowing. When one makes a choice to move or speak, for example, intention manifests as action. Intention thus includes the notion of choice or volition, but, paradoxically, is often initiated habitually or even sometimes unconsciously. He went on to explain, “A disposition to respond, mentally or behaviorally, to circumstances in a characteristic or patterned way is an expression of a subtle, passive influence of intention” (p. 247). This is because of the Buddhist notion of karma, which is the understanding that a person is continually shaped by his or her previous actions. “It is from the background of accumulated patterns that intentions, perceptions and feelings in the next moment are shaped. Every action is thus conditioned by all former actions and every action also has an effect on all subsequent action” (p. 248). Thus our volitional actions spring from habituated dispositions and learned behaviors. Even so, intention is an “active and creative function that has a great impact on how the moment’s experience is organized and presented by the mind” (p. 247).

A major influence on the Western psychological understanding of intentionality is that of the phenomenologist, Husserl who claimed that consciousness is intentional, which does not mean deliberate or willful, “but sheerly a directedness towards the external object and an openness to the world” (Depraz 2001, p. 170). Richardson (2004) went on to explain the notion of intentionality as being necessarily tied to socio-cultural meaning: “intentions ... are associated with the construction of meaning in that they are understood in relation to the interpretive and symbolic systems provided by culture” (p. 487). She drew from cultural psychology (Ratner 1997) in her view of intention and action as one unit, with intention referring to the state of consciousness comprising directedness toward the world, and action comprising what a person might actually do. This echoes the Buddhist notion of intention as an attitude taken toward experience, associated with doing rather than knowing.

In order to continue to position mindfulness within contextual action theory, we turn again to the notion of mindfulness as a goal-directed action, and also potentially a joint action, and project. In what ways can mindfulness be construed as goal-directed? Bishop et al. (2004) say that “much cognition occurs in the service of goals” (p. 236) and that our thoughts and behaviors function in a goal-oriented way to reduce the discrepancy between what is and what is desired. According to them, mindfulness, on the other hand, “teaches us to disengage from goals” (p. 236). However, there is surely the immediate goal of paying attention to present experience. Further, Shapiro et al. (2006) spoke of the superordinate goals in Buddhism of enlightenment and compassion for all beings, and Shapiro (1992) found that medi-

tation practitioners had goals of self-regulation, self-exploration and self-liberation. Clients of mindfulness-based clinical interventions may be advised to let go of their goals of feeling better or more relaxed (Kabat-Zinn 2003, p. 148), but paradoxically, must commit to the goal of dropping these goals and instead attending to their present-moment experience. Kabat-Zinn referred to this emphasis on nonattachment to outcome “a radical departure from most clinical interventions” (p. 148). Yet while mindfulness embodies nonattachment to outcome, it still is initiated intentionally and with the goal of present awareness.

In action theory, action is conceptualized as having social meaning (Young et al. 2005). Although mindfulness may appear to be the private experience of an individual while he or she is meditating or engaged in a mindfulness exercise, as it is practiced in relationship, it becomes a richly social enterprise. In this case, relational connection becomes the object of mindfulness (Surrey 2005). There are other possible social meanings for actions of mindfulness, depending on the practitioner and his or her context. For example, achieving therapeutic goals involves socially sanctioned views of mental health, while aspiring to spiritual goals also involves socially negotiated “ideal” or spiritual qualities such as compassion, wisdom, or empathy.

Further, mindfulness is not only an intentional goal-directed action with social meaning, but can be viewed as action performed *over time*, that is, as a project. According to Young et al. (2005), a project “represents a series of actions, constructed as having common goals, over a midterm period of time” (p. 217). Mindfulness is not a one-time action. In spiritual circles, it is referred to as a practice, which involves formal daily sitting but also an intention to be mindful in daily life activities. The action of mindfulness, then, is repeated each time—hundreds or thousands of times—attention is returned to the object of awareness. This action of noticing when we are escaping, for example, through daydreaming or auto-pilot behaviors, and returning with full attention to the present moment, is performed without judging the pleasant or unpleasant qualities of the object of awareness, that is, the thought, the feeling, or the sensation. A mindfulness project could include such things as daily sitting practice, weekend or 10-day retreats, and also the intention to be mindful in daily activities or in the therapeutic encounter. Mindfulness could also be seen as a part of other life projects, for example, stress-reduction or self-care projects, spiritual-growth projects, compassion-building projects, or enlightenment projects.

Lastly, mindfulness, although usually conceptualized as a private subjective state or trait, can be experienced jointly. Joint action refers to the intentional behavior of a dyad or group of people attempting to realize a common goal or engage in a common process (Young et al. 1997). Mindfulness can be construed as a joint action in its traditional context of students practicing mindfulness meditation within a close relationship with a spiritual teacher and a community. Another way in which mindfulness can form a joint action or project is in counseling. Surrey (2005) posited “relational mindfulness” as part of the therapeutic alliance, whereby “both the therapist and patient are working with the intention to deepen awareness of the present relational experience, with acceptance” (p. 92). She described a mindful

therapist as gradually and organically inviting the client into mindfulness, without explicit meditation instruction:

While the therapist's focus remains on the experience of the patient, both patient and therapist are engaging in a collaborative process of mutual attentiveness and mindfulness in and through relational joining... This view of therapy as co-meditation offers new possibilities for the therapeutic enterprise. Through the relationship, the therapist offers the patient the possibility of staying emotionally present with the therapist, perhaps staying with difficult feelings for "one more moment"... Psychotherapy becomes mindfulness practice, and mindfulness becomes a collaborative process ... (p. 95).

The suggestion that mindfulness can become, in the psychotherapy or counseling framework, a collaborative process highlights the possibility of mindfulness as both joint and goal-directed, in other words, a joint project in itself, or perhaps a functional step of a wider or super-ordinate project within the working alliance. This joint action and project of mindfulness can be understood within a wider theoretical context of relational psychotherapy, and what we have learned about the psychotherapeutic importance of the present moment, and here-and-now processes of attunement and attachment (Siegel 1999; Stern 2004). Viewing mindfulness, then, as an intentional goal-directed action which can form a project, and a joint project, helps to set this phenomenon within a dynamic context over time and invites the exploration of its potentially social aspects in such a context as counseling.

## **The Joint Action of Mindfulness in Counseling**

How might contextual action theory conceptualize counseling clients dealing with problems sensitive to mindfulness? It may be no exaggeration than most problems that clients bring to counseling may be appropriately addressed through a mindfulness-based approach.<sup>2</sup> The range of issues sensitive to mindfulness-based therapy is vast. Mindfulness has been implemented in various treatment programs for such conditions as stress, depression, anxiety, depression relapse prevention, eating disorders, chronic pain, borderline personality disorder, insomnia, substance abuse, anger management, relational conflict (Shapiro and Carlson 2009). The efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions such as MBSR, MBCT, DBT, and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) has been summarized in several reviews and meta-analyses (Baer 2003; Brown et al. 2007; Coelho et al. 2007; Hoffman et al. 2010). Further, there is the view that mindful awareness may be fundamental to all therapy (Shapiro and Carlson 2009). The question then becomes more broadly, what are the primary processes involved in teaching, learning and experiencing mindfulness in the counseling context? Contextual action theory offers a way of investigating these.

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<sup>2</sup> There are some exceptions. The contra-indications for formal mindfulness practice are an area that needs more research (Germer 2005b; Grabovac et al. 2011; Treleaven 2012).

In order to describe and understand the process of learning mindfulness through dialogue, I investigated the joint actions of the dialogue component of an MBSR course (Dyer 2011).<sup>3</sup> Contextual action theory and action project method provided a framework and tools for identifying the target processes of mindfulness as they were manifest relationally. These processes were particular to the psycho-educational format of the single-case study of an 8-week MBSR program. However, since they were based on the dyadic exchanges between MBSR teacher and students which often approximated micro-counseling processes,<sup>4</sup> the study serves as an illustrative example of how contextual action theory may be helpful as a tool for identifying target processes in mindfulness-informed counseling.

The joint action processes identified and described in the findings of the study were first, two super-ordinate joint projects of mindfulness and relationship, and second, five sub-ordinate joint projects of attention, language, insight, compassion and connection. These sub-ordinate joint projects are best understood as functional steps in the process of learning and experiencing mindfulness. In the vignette that follows, contextual action theory is the guiding framework for identifying and understanding these joint processes. What is of interest is how these actions occur relationally, through the dialogue. The enactment of mindfulness is not a uni-directional delivery of advice or information or skill-instruction. The counselor did not simply tell the client to be mindful, or to accept his pain. They worked together, in a goal-directed and joint process, to illuminate the sensory, emotional and cognitive lived inner experience of meeting pain with acceptance and self-compassion, and the linguistic expressions (manifest behavior) of this movement. Furthermore, the counselor embodied and modeled nonjudgmental acceptance and compassion.

### ***Clinical Vignette: Deconstructing a Pain Project***

The dialogue that follows between the client and counselor about chronic pain can be seen as a manifest behavior of the joint action of mindfulness which enacts individual and joint goals. The client wanted to learn mindfulness as a way to reduce his chronic joint pain. He had dealt with his pain in the past by numbing it through medication, and by trying to ignore it. He used a metaphor which is poignant in its culturally gendered valence of tough masculine action: in this session, he said that he typically “John-Waynes” his way through pain. His construction of a pain

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to recognize the contributions of the participants of the research study from which the case vignette for this chapter was taken. In addition, I am grateful to Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Canada Graduate Scholarship) and the Mind and Life Institute (Francisco Varela Grant), for their generous financial support.

<sup>4</sup> Kabat-Zinn (1990) states that MBSR is not therapy, but rather, is an educative process. The facilitator of the MBSR group of my study was not a counselor. However, many of the micro-processes in the dyadic exchanges of the group would be familiar in a counseling context. For the purposes of this chapter, I have named the two participants in the dyad as counselor and client.

project can be seen as a suboptimal life project, since it really hasn't worked, hence his desire to try a different approach. The counselor wanted to teach him another way of working with the pain—mindfulness—which paradoxically invited him to come closer to the pain rather than push it away. So we can see a joint mindfulness project, which at first glance seems at odds with the client's "getting-rid-of-pain project." (Since this is a chronic issue in his life, we might even call it his pain career, in contextual action theory terms). Importantly, there was also a joint relationship project, a strong working alliance in which both parties admired and respected each other, and in which the client felt supported to try a paradoxical, new, and by no means easy, approach to finding a solution to his pain.

In the following excerpt, the client started off speaking generally, conceptually, and even melodramatically, and the counselor assisted him in "retelling" his story in a bottom-up, body-focused narrative. She achieved her goal of teaching mindfulness through dialogue by using such elements as "asks for body sensation" "asks for cognition" "asks for emotion" "asks for clarification." She responded to his experience with a nonjudgmental present-moment curiosity about his thoughts, feelings and sensations. A kind of scaffolding communication ensued with the counselor gently leading the participant into verbalizing his embodied experience. Their joint goal in this moment was to explore his experience of pain:

Client: Whereas I try to focus on all the things that are working but it actually stirred it up, stirred up the feeling of being really, um, old and feeling like a victim and focusing on the pain. So I got really frustrated with it. But frustrated with myself too that I couldn't manage it.... Because I've trained myself to, not to ignore it so much but to focus on other things.

Counselor: Now it sounds like that might have been a bit of story about it, right?

Client: Yeah.

Counselor: Getting old and

Client: Yeah, it was.

Counselor: So is that the story?

Client: Um, the story's been about, um, "is it going to get worse?"

We see the counselor taking a nonjudgmental curious approach to the client's experience as she guided him to separate body sensation from emotion from cognition:

Counselor... Just the sensation, just the bare sensation. What's going on there, without the story, just the sensation of it.

Client: Um, helplessness.

Counselor: Ok. But isn't that the story as well?

Client: Yeah.

Counselor: Ok. The actual feeling, the actual sensation in the body. What is it?

Client: (pause) Apprehension, anxiety.

Counselor: Ok, apprehension and anxiety, those are the emotions that are coming.

Good. But that's still not... I'm guessing that's still not the actual feeling. The actual feeling that stirs it up. What pushes that button?

Client: Pain.

Here the counselor gently drew the client into approaching his pain, noticing it with gentle kindness (joint functional step of attention). He had stated a few minutes prior that he was not able to look at this painful experience—“nope, not going to do it” but in this moment, he and the counselor jointly approached the pain:

Counselor: Ok. So the pain. Can... it's really a hard thing to ask you to do, but it really is an important thing, is to be with the pain. (client sighs). Be with the pain and notice that it arises in the body. And just notice that. Notice that and it's really good that you're noticing the story as well. So keep a tab on that too. But see if you can separate the one from the other. Just see if you can look at the one without the story. (client sighs).

In the counselor's self-confrontation interview, she watched this excerpt from the dialogue and commented that while she was relating with the client, she was paying careful attention. Her action was energized by curiosity in these moments rather than empathy per se and while her goal appeared to be to stay present and responsive, she said it was not exactly a decision.

Researcher: And as you're listening to him and noticing how he is struggling, how do you feel emotionally?

Counselor: Hmm. Not exactly empathy. It's more... not really cognitive, but more conceptual somehow, I'm paying careful, careful attention, I'm staying present with him and each comment, at the same time somehow deciding what the best way to respond is. But it isn't really a decision, it just comes... like from some other place. It's not emotional. It's more... noticing, attending, wondering, staying open.

In the client's self-confrontation interview of this same minute, he identified that he felt met by her.

Client: Well, I felt really heard and understood by her. She really got connection with where I was and where I was feeling it. That's what I felt anyway. And, um, I find when she kind of interacts with me with those kinds of questions it helps me clarify even what I'm experiencing because some parts of it I don't know what I'm experiencing.

Presumably the counselor's “careful, careful attention” to his experience contributed to his feeling heard. Another way of phrasing this would be that he felt noticed. The client reports that she helped him clarify even what he is experiencing. In relational psychotherapeutic language, we might say that attunement has occurred.

Schore (1994) defined relational attunement as contingent communication which is more than just perceiving the verbal and nonverbal signals of the other, but also the ability to allow one's state of mind to be influenced by that of the other, so that one “feels felt” by the other. In this moment of the clinical vignette, we see how the joint superordinate action of mindfulness includes sub-ordinate actions (or more precisely, functional steps) of attention, language and connection. One of the foundational functional steps of mindfulness is attention: noticing with gentle kindness. In the counseling relationship, it is not only the counselor who pays kind attention to the client's experience. It is not a uni-directional action. It becomes joint as the

client joined the counselor and together they paid kind attention to his experience. The client was also paying attention to the counselor, as he explained in his self-confrontation interview:

... I really pay attention to her interactions ... She kind of reflects it back to me and that helps me sort it out. ... In the way that she gives no answers but she asks questions. I actually try to engage with her to get her question, not to get the answer. To get the question that I need.

His overt goal in the interaction appeared to be to get clarity and understanding into his experience. At the same time, we can observe the more implicit or nonconscious dance of contingent relating. He was waiting for the question to be posed that will release his answer. The counselor had commented in her self-confrontation interview on this segment that her response was “not really a decision, it just comes, like from some other place.” This example of joint intentionality is similar to Husserl’s view that all of consciousness is intentional, involves being directed toward something, being open to the world (Depraz 2001, p. 170), and implies that intention may be active, passive, implicit or fully conscious. In this sense client and therapist intentionality may also be considered to be implicitly oriented to the therapeutic tasks and processes involved in achieving individual and joint goals (Young et al. 2002).

Intertwined with the functional step of paying attention is the functional step of insight which counselor and client jointly enacted within the wider project of mindfulness:

Counselor: Do you notice what happens to the sensation when the story starts?

Client: Yes.

Counselor: What happens?

Client: It gets worse.

Counselor: Ok. Ok.

Client: Gets worse.

Counselor: Ok. So when you ended up in the wheelchair

Client: laughs

Counselor: Where is that, where is that, in terms of past, present, and future?

Client: That’s in the future.

Counselor: Ok. So we’ve left the moment and we’ve gone to

Client: To the future.

Counselor: Gone to the future. And so it’s excellent that you’re noticing that.

Here we can observe how salient the joint actions of attention and insight are. The client was noticing body sensation and cognition. Held in the curious, kind, attentive relational container where they were engaged jointly in understanding his experience, the client was even able to laugh at his own story. Humor is another emotion that energized the action.

The next segment of the exchange highlights the functional step of language: the counselor assisted the client in verbalizing the experience of pain. She does this by actually suggesting a possible metaphor, in a kind of “scaffolding” process by which she put words in his mouth and led him into a different way of relating to the pain:

Counselor: Pain is one of the more difficult things to work with. But if you look at it really, really closely, you might notice that there's um almost a wall. Is there a sensation around it like pushing it away?

Client: Yup, yup.

Counselor Ok.

Client: Yeah, and pushing up against it too.

Counselor: Ok. Pushing up against it. Ok, and if you can soften those walls a little bit and almost open to it.

The following week, the client came to the session expressing wonder and satisfaction that he had been able to relate to his pain differently that week:

Client: The pain hasn't gone away but the way that I approach it and how I feel about it is what's different. So I'm still experiencing the pain, the inflammation. But it's the way I respond to it that seems to be so different. I decided to [look at pain softly], to see it was like a pat of butter just melting in a pan and then disappearing. Then it's not at the top of my mind but I'm aware of it

Counselor: And you mentioned that you noticed that when pain arises

Client: Oh yeah

Counselor: And then what do you do?

Client: I make a choice to stay with it. Which I never did before. I either resisted it, ignored it, or go take a bunch of drugs, painkillers. So this week I slowed it right down and I see the pat of butter and see it soften down. It's my way of opening to it. It doesn't necessarily go away but it kind of gets in perspective.

Counselor: Ok

Client: It's still there. But it's not everything.

An important aspect of the context of their joint action was the client's gendered conditioning about how a man "should" deal with pain. Again we can see how two quite different individual goals (getting through and beating pain versus being with pain) come together in the joint action of the counseling dialogue. The client says he has noticed outside counseling the difference between his sub-optimal project of "powering through" pain and his mindful alternative "stay[ing] with it" and "see[ing] it soften." This difference is enacted in the counseling dialogue itself by the kind attention of the counselor to the client's experience, expressed both nonverbally and verbally:

Counselor (smiling, nodding): Now, are you sure you're being gentle and kind with yourself?

Client: Most of the time.

Counselor: Most of the time.

Client: Not all of the time.

Counselor: What about the other times?

Client: Um. One of my big stories is ... I was always told, Boys don't cry. Be tough. Get through it. So I recognize that I go back to that when the pain comes up.

Counselor: Ok

Client: So instead of stopping and being mindful of it, I power through it. Cause good boys are supposed to do that.



Counselor: Ok

Client: So I've noticed that link.

The client and counselor engaged in several joint functional steps in the hierarchy of actions taken to learn and experience mindfulness. These functional steps of attention, language, connection, compassion and insight were enacted in a mindful deconstruction of the client's pain project. In the functional step of connection, the counselor worked to stay present, and the client reported he felt connected to her. Visibly, there was a physical attunement expressed through nods, smiles, and even chuckles. In the functional step of compassion, the counselor modeled nonjudgmental, caring attention to the client's experience, expressing calm curiosity about it, and invited the client explicitly to do the same. Thus, the client in this case vignette did not learn mindfulness by doing formal meditation practice or a mindfulness "exercise." He learned and experienced mindfulness in dialogue through processes that we can identify from the research perspective of action theory and action-project method as joint actions, functional steps or projects. In relational models of counseling, how these processes (joint actions) unfold and how change occurs, are the targets of exploration and processing. In this case, the client engaged in an attuned reciprocal dialogue in which he noticed his counselor, was noticed by his counselor, and most importantly, noticed his counselor noticing him. Their kind, patient, joint de-construction of his pain project was enacted through counseling dialogue but then carried outside the session as the client engaged in a new and more functional relationship with pain.

### ***Counseling Tasks and Counseling Outcomes***

From this example, the five counseling tasks within contextual action theory, as identified by Young et al. (2011), can be observed. Contextual action theory understands counseling processes as goal-directed action, "which importantly parallels the processes in which clients... are engaged" (p. 23) in their lives outside of counseling. The first counseling task is linking counseling and life processes. In this case example, the action of counseling was linked with the client's life-project, his illness career of pain. The counseling dialogue was "about" his pain career and at the same time constructed a new way of being with the pain, through the enactment of mindfulness. The second task of counseling is identifying systems and levels of projects and action. Even in the few minutes of the case vignette, the counselor assisted the client in identifying how his language, thoughts and feelings amplified the experience of suffering. In the analysis, I identified levels of projects and actions, including the joint mindfulness and relationship projects, the functional steps, and the way the client's pain project was met and deconstructed through mindful dialogue. The third counseling task is dealing with emotion, which we see, in this example, as energizing and steering the dialogue through such affect as fear, curiosity and even joy.

Counseling's fourth task, dealing with suboptimal actions, projects and careers, was approached; the client wanted to "beat" or get rid of pain, while the counselor invited him to stay with and move closer to pain. On a certain level, their goals are at cross-purposes, yet the action of mindfulness—turning toward the problem with nonjudgmental attention—paradoxically helped the client achieve his goal. Lastly, the fifth counseling task, creating and maintaining the working alliance, was an essential aspect of the mindfulness project. The client's suboptimal "powering through pain" project was explored through mindful dialogue, within a working alliance which is constructed through all five functional steps of attention, language, insight, compassion and connection that comprised the larger mindfulness and relationship projects. In sum, the client had a new experience within the therapeutic relationship, discovering just how curious, kind and present he could be with his pain, and then he was able to continue to process and expand this new knowing outside of session. These five counseling tasks are not sequential but rather simultaneous and concurrent, just as the several levels of joint functional steps of the enactment of mindfulness through the counseling dialogue.

Contextual action theory can also serve as a tool for understanding counseling goals and outcomes. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, the negotiation of counseling goals and outcomes in a mindfulness-based (acceptance-based) counseling paradigm may appear paradoxical at first glance. Buddhist psychology and the mindfulness tradition assume that our suffering has its origins in our basic human drives, for the most part unconscious and beyond our control. Desire is the compulsion to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Mindfulness teaches us to uncover these insatiable desires, and sit with pleasure and pain without being run by them (Olendzki 2005). Baer (2003) noted that mindfulness is associated with non-striving. This may seem at odds with action theory with its emphasis on agency, goals, and movement over time.

This apparent paradox can be resolved when we recall that intentionality is understood within Buddhist psychology as a core ontological factor of existence, and the "gesture of mindfulness" is an intentional opening to experience in a nonjudgmental and curious way. This gesture, or action of mindfulness, does have a profound goal, although many writers such as Kabat-Zinn warn of the dangers of being too caught up in focusing on the outcome. The goal is liberation from suffering, a rather more-encompassing version of symptom reduction. The concept of "choiceless awareness" in advanced mindfulness practice means that rather than taking actions of pursuing and avoiding, we become able to take "right action," to experience all of life more fully and with less suffering.

Within the Buddhist philosophical model, change occurs when we are able to, through mindfulness, become aware of habitual and hitherto unconscious patterns which lead to suffering, and with the intentionality intrinsic to our nature, make different choices, in Buddhist terms, "right action," toward our happiness and the happiness of others. Clients regularly bring goals of getting rid of suffering of various types. These goals will be embedded in each client's particular life-projects outside of the session. A mindfulness-oriented counseling approach will indeed address cli-

ent goals, but through approaching what is unwanted with kind curiosity rather than getting rid of it. The case example demonstrates how intentionality and goal direction are co-constructed in attuned dialogue. The client shifts from “John-wayning” his way through pain, and striving against a “wall of pain,” to watching the pain “melt like butter.” These metaphors capture the emergent action of mindfulness and may be seen as expressing a moment of liberation from suffering. Thus mindfulness is enacted dialogically in this vignette.

Contextual action theory provides a “systemic and dynamic-process frame of joint human activity” (Young et al. 2011, p. 35) in which even an action as elusive and apparently subjective and private as mindfulness, can be investigated as it is enacted jointly in counseling dialogue. The joint actions, projects and functional steps of the enactment of mindfulness were particularly salient in this case vignette since the client was a participant in a psycho-educational group, the purpose of which was to learn mindfulness. Hence, we could assume that mindfulness was being taught and learned, and subsequently observe, describe and understand *how* that was done, that is, the joint dialogical processes of mindfulness as action and project. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the “gesture of mindfulness” in counseling can be observed in different ways: as a common factor, as formal meditation instruction, or as an embodiment and enactment of certain phenomena such as attention or compassion. It is the latter that was highlighted in the case vignette, as the counselor and client jointly deconstructed a “suboptimal” pain career and constructed a new, more benign and helpful experience of pain. The construction occurred relationally, both verbally and nonverbally, through five functional steps of joint attention, language, insight, compassion, and connection. The functional step of connection can be seen as reflecting attunement processes. The super-ordinate joint actions of mindfulness and relationship were contiguously co-constructed and enacted. Thus contextual action theory served as a generative and highly integrative framework for understanding key processes of mindfulness in a helping dialogue.

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# Chapter 16

## A Contextual Action Theory Perspective on Self-Efficacy in Individual Counseling

Carey Grayson Penner

This chapter aims to advance understandings on the process of self-efficacy construction within counseling. It applies contextual action theory with the goals of deepening Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy construct and offering suggestions for how this expanded conceptualization could be employed by counselors seeking to enhance their clients' self-efficacy. It draws from conceptual arguments, empirical findings, and clinical observations and responds to the need for knowledge on the process of self-efficacy construction within counseling.

The chapter begins with a brief conceptual and empirical introduction to self-efficacy designed to demonstrate how research on the sources of self-efficacy has become stagnant. It proceeds to demonstrate how the core tenets of contextual action theory offer conceptual advancements that are useful for renewing self-efficacy research and generating knowledge on the processes underlying self-efficacy construction within counseling. The majority of the chapter adopts a contextual action theory framework and draws upon case materials to explore underlying processes of the four main sources of self-efficacy and, more importantly, illuminate processes useful for constructing client self-efficacy within individual counseling sessions. This culminates in five recommendations for helping client's construct self-efficacy.

### Self-Efficacy and Counseling

Self-efficacy was a core construct in the development and evolution of Albert Bandura's (1986, 1999, 2001) social cognitive theory and remains at the center of the theory's research activities. It was introduced to the psychological literature in a series of articles that reported on investigations involving therapeutic

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intervention with participants who experienced symptoms of a specific phobia (Bandura 1977; Bandura and Adams 1977; Bandura et al. 1977, 1975). The first of these articles asserted the additive benefits of a self-directed mastery experience for snake phobic participants whose fears had been eliminated using a participant modeling intervention (Bandura et al. 1975). In the second article, Bandura (1977) coined the term self-efficacy in reference to the self-competence ratings and sense of self-competence identified in his earlier research. Self-efficacy was operationalized as specific perceptions of self-confidence, alternatively referred to as self-efficacy expectations or self-efficacy beliefs, that were assessed through pencil and paper measures that asked participants to report on their ability to perform target behaviors related to their snake phobic symptoms (i.e., touch a snake, hold a snake, etc.). These articles supported four main sources of self-efficacy, master experience, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and reduced physiological arousal.

In spite of a proliferation of self-efficacy research spanning more than 30 years, the remarkable consistency of findings regarding its sources and consequences, and the ever growing list of self-efficacy scales, knowledge regarding the sources of self-efficacy remains relatively unchanged from the seminal research of the 1970s. Though the body of self-efficacy research encompasses considerable research demonstrating positive correlations between self-efficacy increases and favorable counseling outcomes for substance abuse (Gossop et al. 1990; Kavanagh and Sitharthan 1996; Rounds-Bryant et al. 1997; Sitharthan and Kavanagh 1990), depression (Jarrett et al. 2007; Yusuf and Kavanagh 1990), anxiety (Biran and Wilson 1981; Borden et al. 1991; Williams et al. 1989), and disordered eating (Schneider et al. 1987; Wilson et al. 2002), this research has not expanded understandings regarding the sources of self-efficacy within counseling process. In fact the process of self-efficacy construction within counseling is a neglected area of study.

## **Conceptual Benefits of a Contextual Action Theory Perspective**

Contextual action theory offers a theoretical framework and research methodology that provide new avenues for conceptualizing and researching self-efficacy as a counseling process. In particular, contextual action theory provides a conceptual lens whereby self-efficacy can be viewed as a dynamic interactive process that is embedded within the joint action of counselors and clients. This theory rests on a complex understanding of human intentionality to depict human experience within relationship across time. Though these aspects of contextual action theory are highlighted briefly below, readers interested in a more detailed presentation of the theoretical and methodological features of the theory are directed to the first section of this book.

## A Process Perspective

Action theory defines action as intentional, goal-directed behavior and seeks to understand human experience according to the goals and intentions of the actor (Valach et al. 2002). By focusing on the intentionality of human experience contextual action theory and the action-project method provide a means for linking action across time (Young et al. 2005). Consequently, discrete behavioral acts labeled action elements are understood according to the functional steps and goals that they construct over time. Together these three levels of action organization provide a lens for viewing client self-efficacy as a dynamic interactive process unfolding within the communicative exchanges of a counseling session. The action systems, labeled action, project, and career, serve as a means for embedding self-efficacy processes within much longer time frames thus linking clients' in-session action to their out-of-session experiences. The capacity to describe human experience across short- and long-term time frames provide a process perspective on self-efficacy construction as it occurs within and across counseling sessions.

## A Relational Lens

Contextual action theory's process perspective is embedded within a relational view of human action (Valach et al. 2002; Young et al. 2002). All human experience, including self-efficacy, is viewed as occurring within a social context and is understood according to a number of specific action systems and three distinct perspectives on action. The action systems also encompass *joint-goals* that are useful for analyzing the connectedness of clients' and counselors' actions and for making sense of their joint-action as dynamic intentional processes.

Contextual action theory as an explanatory framework embeds client self-efficacy construction within a relational perspective, something that is particularly important given the relational nature of counseling. The three perspectives on action provide additional means for embedding client self-efficacy within the client-counselor relationship and for understanding self-efficacy construction as a dynamic interactive process of the client-counselor relationship. More specifically, the social meaning perspective provides a means for understanding clients' and counselors' overt behavior and internal process according to the shared meanings that support their joint-action. The social meaning perspective also considers the particular meanings that are constructed within clients' and counselors' joint-action. All told, the social meaning perspective and joint-action systems provide a useful framework for identifying and examining interactive counseling processes underlying the four sources of self-efficacy.



## Methodological Benefits of a Contextual Action Theory Perspective

The first step in examining interactive counseling processes of self-efficacy construction is to identify client self-efficacy beliefs as they become manifest within counseling sessions. The typical procedures used to operationalize self-efficacy involve a paper and pencil self-efficacy scale. Though this procedure works well for assessing a predetermined set of self-efficacy beliefs relevant to a highly prescribed client issue, it is not particularly amenable for identifying the diversity of self-efficacy beliefs that naturally emerge within the counseling process. This methodological difficulty may be a key reason for the lack of research investigating client self-efficacy as a dynamic interactive process of individual counseling. It is also a barrier that can be surmounted using the action-project method.

Penner (2011) used the action-project method to develop a coding system for identifying occurrences of client self-efficacy within the counseling process of young adult clients and professional counselors. He started with a system that Bauer and Bonanno (2001) developed to analyze semi-structured interview transcripts and adapted it for use in an action-project investigation of client self-efficacy. Penner's coding system conceptualized client self-efficacy as a dynamic joint-action process and utilized the action-project method's data sources to identify efficacy relevant action occurring within and across the individual counseling sessions of young adult clients and professional counselors. His system identified core phrases that indicated an assessment of the client's ability (i.e., "I can ...", "I am able to ...", "It is easy for me to ..." etc.) or inability (i.e., "I can't ...", "I am not very good at ...", "I find it hard to ..." etc.) within the transcripts of the counseling sessions and the subsequent self-confrontation interview transcripts. Client utterances identified in the transcripts of the counseling sessions were conceptualized as manifest behavior that reflected the clients' naturally occurring self-efficacy beliefs, similar to the types of responses solicited via pencil and paper self-efficacy scales but more endogenous and closer to the source. Since the action project method typically uses the self-confrontation interview as a source of internal process data, the coded utterances in the clients' self-confrontation interview were understood as the specific self-efficacy beliefs that were operative in the corresponding minute of the session. Penner's system also coded counselor utterances that referenced the clients' abilities; these codes were based upon the same kinds of phrases noted above but encompassed nouns or pronouns that referenced the client in place of the personal pronoun "I" used in the client codes.

Similar to client codes, the coded counselor utterances encompassed action elements from the counseling session transcripts as well as internal process data from the self-confrontation interviews. Unlike the client codes, the efficacy relevant counselor utterances were not treated as the clients' self-efficacy beliefs. Instead they were understood as constituents of the joint-action processes that constructed perceptions of the clients' capabilities.

The primary finding arising out of Penner's (2011, p. ii) research was that client self-efficacy was "embedded throughout all phases of the counseling process including exploration, problem definition, intervention, client change, consolidation of change, and termination." This finding demonstrated the utility of his coding system and the usefulness of the action project method for studying client self-efficacy as a process of individual counseling.

## **A Contextual Action Theory Perspective on the Construction of Self-Efficacy within Individual Counseling**

Penner's (2011) research demonstrated that the contextual action theory framework and the action theory method can be used to describe client self-efficacy as a dynamic interactive process. More specifically, his research showed that the multi-dimensional model of action offers an epistemological and ontological lens useful for understanding discrete manifestations of client self-efficacy as linked across time and for embedding their construction within the dialogical exchange of individual counseling sessions. In his conceptualization the various action systems and levels of action organization establish functional links that connected discrete manifestations across time thereby providing a basis for reexamining the roles of mastery experience and physiological arousal in the development of self-efficacy. Similarly, the social meaning perspective and the joint goals/projects specified within the action depict the social construction of client self-efficacy thereby offering an expanded perspective on the verbal persuasion and vicarious learning sources of client self-efficacy. The remainder of this chapter draws upon Penner's research and expands on the four sources of self-efficacy by articulating joint-action processes accompanying self-efficacy construction within individual counseling sessions.

## **A Process Perspective on Mastery Experience and Physiological Arousal**

Research has consistently shown that mastery experience is the strongest source of increased self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1997). The successful enactment of a target behavior yields affirmative beliefs regarding one's capability to perform similar behavior in the future. This empirical observation provides compelling rationale for the use of role-play and guided behavioral techniques within counseling. These approaches are particularly useful when working with client issues, that is, specific phobia, that center on a specific set of overt behavioral enactments. Guided behavioral techniques typically utilize an incremental approach starting with less difficult behavior and gradually increasing to more and more difficult enactments (Bandura 1997). This optimizes the likelihood that clients will experience success early in the

process, draws upon early increases in client self-efficacy, and provides a progressive pathway that builds upon clients' increasing levels of self-efficacy.

### ***Mastery Experience as Goal Directed Action***

The typical orientation toward mastery experience involves the use of a functional analysis. This approach to self-efficacy is highly focused and tends to identify a limited number of very specific behavioral enactments required for effective performance in a particular area of concern, for example, specific phobia, addictions, or disordered eating (Bandura 1997). Taking a telonomical view, a contextual action theory perspective expands the list of behavioral enactments to include dialogue related to the area of function as this dialogue is enacted with the goal of addressing clients problem situations. This dialogue encompasses all of the in-session dialogue pertinent to clients' problem situations including that which identifies, explores, and seeks to address their concern as well as subsequent dialogue that observes and consolidates positive changes occurring in relation to the problem situation. Similarly, precursor behavior such as the decision to seek counseling and the action taken in arranging and attending a first session also constitute important steps toward the goal of addressing a problem situation. The telonomical view taken by contextual action theory offers a broader understanding of the precursor behavior and the dialogical actions casting them as important mastery experiences relevant to the goals clients construct within counseling. Consequently, the individual and joint-action of counseling constitutes concrete steps toward clients' goals and offers opportunities for enhanced perceptions of their capabilities.

A contextual action theory perspective on counseling includes explicit counseling goals (joint projects) which counselors and clients agree to work toward as well as non-explicit joint projects that are constructed within the action of the sessions. Essentially the joint projects of a client–counselor dyad answer the question, “What are we doing together?”, an answer that typically incorporates goals related to a problem situation that the client is experiencing outside of the sessions. Viewing clients' in-session action according to the joint projects of the counseling session establishes functional connections between their in-session action, problem targets, and perceptions of their capability to address the problem area. The functional links allow action elements enacted in a counseling session to be located on a continuum of behavioral enactments related to clients' problem focused goals. Furthermore, in-session action that helps a client move forward toward a counseling goal constitutes a mastery experience and helps construct perceived capability related to the goal.

Consider the example of a 21-year-old emerging adult female who enlisted the help of a professional counselor to address her transition to adulthood (Penner 2011). In the course of their first session the dyad explored the client's family relationships, past and present. Their discussion noted that the client's parents separated when the client was 9 years old and she described how the separation and subsequent divorce led to the development of a very close relationship between her

father and her. Their conversation also described feelings of dissatisfaction that the client experienced in her current relationship with her father expressed in terms of her inability to communicate frankly and openly. The client's goal of reestablishing a close relationship with her father became a key focus of the first three counseling sessions. The goal's initial construction was marked by perceived inefficacy regarding her ability to communicate with her father and her stepmother.

Since the action theory perspective understands the dyad's conversational elements as manifest behavior in service of the client's relational goal, the client's in-session efforts to address her relational goal constitute behavioral enactments toward her goal. In this particular case the client's goal directed behavioral enactments involved open self-disclosure to the counselor about the relational issues she felt incapable of talking about with her father. Her experience of talking openly about the relational issues represents progress toward her relational goal of communicating openly with her father and constitutes the type of master experience known to enhance self-efficacy. Her open self-disclosure with the counselor was also accompanied by expressions of perceived efficacy related to her communicative and self-disclosure capabilities with her dad and stepmother. Focusing on the client's intentional framework helps establish connections between the discrete expressions of efficacy/inefficacy and the conversational elements enacted toward meeting the client's relational goal.

### ***Integrating Client Emotionality to Create New Mastery Experiences***

The importance of the functional links and the corresponding in-session mastery experience becomes more pertinent and useful for counselors when they attend to the emotional states accompanying clients' in-session action/enactments. Emotions serve to steer and energize clients' manifest behavior within the contextual action theory framework and are important to their in-session actions. Though the counseling dialogue that aims to identify, explore, and address clients' problem situations might be thought of as low difficulty level enactments, the level of emotional arousal clients experience in conjunction to these goals increases the difficulty level considerably. From a self-efficacy perspective, heightened emotionality is inversely related to self-efficacy beliefs and is considered a contextual factor that increases the difficulty of a behavioral enactment. Returning to the case, the strong emotions the client experiences when disclosing how problems with her stepmother get in the way of her relationship with her father serve to raise the difficulty level of the her conversational action. In managing her emotions and enacting this emotion-filled conversation she constructs heightened self-efficacy in relation to talking about her relationship with her dad while experiencing and managing the resulting emotion, something that she had felt incapable of doing outside of the sessions.

An action framework utilizes the internal processes perspective to incorporate observations regarding clients' emotional states. In keeping with an action theory

conceptualization, action remains as the main unit of analysis and allows for integrating multiple perspectives. Manifest behavior, internal processes—thoughts and feelings, and social meaning are all simultaneously present at an individual and joint level in the construction of action over time. Consequently, clients' in-session enactments are viewed in light of their intentional frameworks and their emotional states. This provides a useful lens for integrating two sources of self-efficacy, mastery experience and physiological arousal, and for considering how clients' emotionally laden behavioral enactments might construct perceptions of capability related to the goals linking their in-session and out-of-session action.

The case presented above offers a positive example for how counselors can use contextual action theory to engage in efficacy enhancing conversations with their clients. The thoughts and emotions that the client experienced when feeling blocked in an important relational project were potentially strong enough to inhibit an open discussion about her relational project and motivate her to avoid talking about the relationship. However, the enactment of an open dialogue with a counselor while experiencing the strong emotions associated with her relational project facilitated a more difficult mastery experience and provided the client with an opportunity for constructing perceptions of capability. The counselor supported the client's mastery experience by being attentive and responsive to all three perspectives of action, the client's intentional framework, emotional experiences, and in-session behavior. More specifically, she joined the client in working toward the client's goals, developing a safe therapeutic relationship, and by supporting the client in regulating her emotions.

Thus, a contextual action theory perspective understands that changes to the intentional frameworks of clients and counselors that allow the integration of mastery experience leading to reduced physiological arousal as key sources of client self-efficacy. This expanded view is particularly useful for identifying self-regulatory processes, that is, thoughts and emotions that are needed for the successful enactment of target behaviors. Since clients' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their self-regulatory capabilities are highly influential in whether they enact behavior relevant to their goals (Bandura 1997), the experience of successful self-regulation has a compounded effect. It leads to increased self-regulatory self-efficacy and facilitates client engagement with the counseling relationship. The increase in self-regulatory self-efficacy supports clients' out-of-session action during emotionally laden situations. The successful enactment of emotionally charged, salient, loaded target behaviors through joint dialogical experiences constructs transferable self-efficacy beliefs related to targeted behavioral enactments outside the counseling sessions.

To this point the chapter has articulated how contextual action theory contributes to a clearer understanding of process nature of self-efficacy in contrast to the more traditional understanding of it as a belief. Specifically, the evidence reviewed in this chapter showed how self-efficacy reflects the expressed intentional frameworks of a client in session, which in turn, can establish functional links between the client's in-session and out-of-session actions. It has also shown how this provides an expanded view of the role of mastery experience and helps integrate the role of physiological arousal in understanding the construction of self-efficacy. The next section builds upon this understanding and seeks to expand upon and integrate the

social persuasion and modeling sources of self-efficacy into the action theoretical framework.

## **A Relational View on Social Persuasion and Vicarious Learning**

The social persuasion source of self-efficacy encompasses the encouraging and affirming words people receive about their abilities. In simple terms it involves hearing the words, “You can do it” from another person, where “it” refers to a specific behavioral enactment. Social persuasion also encompasses the actions a person takes to arrange specific activities so as to enable another person to engage in successful, confidence building experiences and avoid premature failures (Bandura 1999). Both forms of social/verbal persuasion are highly relevant to a counseling situation.

The modeling or vicarious learning source of self-efficacy refers to self-efficacy gained by watching someone else enact target behavior (Bandura 1997). It involves the increase in confidence one gains while watching someone similar to oneself succeed in a course of action. This source seems particularly relevant to counseling when one considers the many intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that counselors model in their work with clients.

### ***Linking Client and Counselor Action According to Their Joint Goals***

As noted above, contextual action theory conceptualizes clients’ and counselors’ in-session behavior as goal directed. Clients enter counseling relationships with certain goals in mind and in the course of counseling sessions articulate problem situations they want to address through the counseling. Counselors’ intentional frameworks incorporate the counseling defined superordinate goal of helping clients as well as goals related to the specific problem situations that clients bring to the counseling sessions. Through the dialogical action of counseling, counselors’ helping goals coalesce with their clients’ problem situation goals to establish the joint goals and projects of counseling. For example, Young et al. (2011) found that the joint action of young adult clients and professional counselors constructed several kinds of joint projects including relational, identity, educational, and vocational projects.

Viewing clients’ and counselors’ action according to shared goals is useful for re-examining verbal persuasion and modeling sources of self-efficacy and for describing underlying joint processes at work in the construction of client self-efficacy. In the same way that the telonomical lens of contextual action theory establishes functional links that help expand the mastery and physiological arousal sources of self-efficacy, the social constructionist lens used to conceptualize joint goals and

shared social meaning establishes functional links between clients' and counselors' individual goal directed action. Put another way, the action elements of counselors and client are seen as unfolding in a meaningful goal directed manner. These elements include efficacy relevant utterances, discrete client and counselor utterances that reference clients' abilities thereby offering evaluations of efficacy and inefficacy. For example, dialogue from the case referenced earlier in the chapter includes an action sequence where the counselor describes a way that the client might initiate a conversation with her father and then asks, "Would you be able to do that?" and the client offers an efficacious evaluation by saying, "Sure." The counsellor continues by asking, "And could you do that with your step-mother as well?" The client responds by saying, "I don't know" thereby suggesting doubts about her capability. Consistent with the three perspectives on action, the utterances also constitute the manifest behavior that clients and counselors seek to make sense of. In this way the social meaning constructed in their dialogical action encompasses the efficacious and inefficacious evaluation of client and counselor alike.

### ***Verbal Persuasion and Modeling as Social Constructive Processes***

The practical benefits of an action theoretical perspective on the verbal persuasion and modeling sources of client self-efficacy can be seen in the case example presented in this chapter. As noted above, the joint action that described this client's problem situation included the client's inefficacious self-evaluations regarding her ability to talk openly with her father. Her perceived inefficacy served to block her in her goal of reestablishing a close and open relationship with her father. The dyad's joint action also identified another barrier for her relational goal. This barrier encompassed problems that the client experienced with her father's wife and was described in terms of the client's inability to talk with her stepmother. The client's perceived inability also encompassed emotional self-regulation inefficacy.

The dialogical action that constructed perceptions of capability for this client included several examples of a distinct pattern of action. These action sequences began with statements of perceived inefficacy, that is the client's self-evaluations as well as the counselor's paraphrases, were then followed by one or more efficacy questions from the counselor, and finally ended with a client declaration of perceived ability. In essence the counselor used questions that invited the client to name her capability, rather than utterances that declared the client's capability. In these examples of verbal persuasion, the counselor's questions assumed the client's capability and provided opportunities for the client to join the counselor in naming specific abilities pertinent to the client's goals. Hence, the counselor modeled an efficacious orientation toward the client's problem situation and used dialogue that encouraged the client to identify specific action she could take to move toward her goals. The combination of the counselor's attentiveness to the client's goals, adoption of an agentic or efficacious stance (modeling), and her collaborative style of

dialogue were instrumental in the construction of self-efficacy for this client. They also provide a strong example of how the verbal persuasion and modeling sources of self-efficacy can be expanded and described as a social construction processes embedded within the counseling dialogue.

## **Recommendations for Counselors**

Contextual action theory conceptualizes individual counseling as a relationship that is constructed out the goal-directed communicative exchanges of a client and a counselor. This conceptualization invites counselors to view clients' in-session behavior in light of the meanings constructed over the course of one or more sessions. The contextual action theory framework also enables counselors to move back and forth between a micro level view of clients' in-session action and a macro level understanding the meanings that are being jointly constructed within the counseling sessions. The micro level perspective provides counselors with the ability to detect their clients' discrete expressions of efficacy and inefficacy and the macro level perspective offers counselors opportunities to harness the constructive processes observed in the preceding section. What follows are practical recommendations for using this framework toward constructing increased client self-efficacy within individual counseling sessions.

### ***Attend to Client's Efficacious and Inefficacious Dialogue***

Recognizing expressions of efficacy and inefficacy is the first step toward helping clients construct increased self-efficacy. From an action theory perspective this involves attending to key elements of their manifest behavior including phrases such as, "I can ...", "I can't ...", "I find it hard to ...", "It's easy ...", "I'm not very good at ...", etc. As noted earlier, Penner (2011) found that these types of phrases were embedded throughout the counseling process in a sample of professional counselors and their young adult clients. Noticing and attending to the micro level expressions offer counselor insight into the perceptions clients have of their abilities.

### ***Be Mindful of the Goals Constructed in the Client's Dialogue***

Attentiveness to goals is a defining feature of contextual action theory and is critical to its use as a framework for counseling. It is also indispensable when it comes to making sense of the action elements used to detect expressions of client self-efficacy. Expressions of efficacy or inefficacy are understood according to the goals that clients articulate and form within counseling sessions.



Goals give meaning to the clients' self-efficacy beliefs. Perceived inefficacy may be experienced as innocuous if the ability is irrelevant to a client's goals. On the other hand, perceptions of inefficacy related to important goals are often defined as barriers and are definitive of the problem situations clients seek to address in counseling. Being attentive to client goals increases the relevance of counseling and offers clients opportunities to make progress toward their goals.

### ***View the Dialogue of Counseling as a Joint Action Process that Constructs Meaning for the Client***

A contextual action theory approach to counseling views the dialogue of counseling as a joint action process. The dialogue that identifies and explores clients' problem situations and provides insight and self-management strategies for clients is particularly important because it is defined by the superordinate goal of helping the clients move forward toward reaching their goal. By viewing the sessions as such, counselors understand their clients' engagement in the counseling process as low-level mastery experiences that are linked to increased perceptions of capability. Counselors who communicate this meaning within the counseling sessions that is, notice increased clarity gained by talking about the situation, note the steps clients take toward their goals, inquire about subsequent steps the client could take and so forth, help their clients experience increased self-efficacy in relation to their counseling goals. Focusing on practical self-management strategies enacted outside the sessions provides clients with additional mastery experiences that further heighten self-efficacy.

### ***Consider the Role of Client Emotionality***

From a contextual action theory perspective, emotions are steering processes that direct and energize client behavior. Client emotionality within the session indicates the significance of what is being discussed. It suggests that the client goals are highly important. It also alerts counselors to be mindful of any expressions of efficacy or inefficacy. The combination of heightened emotion and expressions of inefficacy are particularly important in that they indicate that clients are experiencing barriers in relation to their goals. The dialogue that identifies and explores clients' problem situations and provides insight and self-management strategies in these situations are more difficult for clients because of the diminished self-efficacy experienced with heightened physiological arousal. Consequently, the mastery experience gained in talking through these situations is particularly useful for constructing perceptions of client self-efficacy. As with the lower level mastery experiences counselors are advised to process these discussions with their clients taking care to note the successful enactments and goal related progress experienced therein.

## ***Be Intentional in Communicating About Clients' Abilities***

Contextual action theory views counseling as goal directed action that is reflective of the individual and shared goals of clients and counselors. In this view the dialogue of counseling is action that reflects and constructs shared social meanings related to counselors' and clients' goals. This perspective on counseling suggests that the dialogue of counseling constructs perceptions of clients' capabilities. Counselors who draw from this perspective as well as an understanding of the modeling and verbal persuasion sources of self-efficacy seek opportunities to help clients construct self-efficacy beliefs. As noted in the case material presented in the previous section, counselors who frame the conversation in terms of what their clients *can do* about their situation model a self-efficacious orientation. Similarly, by inviting clients to identify, describe, and explore what they have done in a situation or what they might do in a situation, counselors facilitate a conversation about what their clients can do thereby constructing perceptions of ability.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter applied the process perspective and relational lens of contextual action theory to advance knowledge on the process of self-efficacy construction in individual counseling. It took the four sources of self-efficacy, conceptualized them as joint-action processes, and provided case examples to illustrate how client self-efficacy is constructed in counseling. The chapter ended with several practical recommendations for how counselors might utilize contextual action theory to help their clients construct increased self-efficacy.

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## Chapter 17

# Counseling Women: Feminist Perspectives and Contextual Action Theory

Natalee E. Popadiuk

Janna, a 27-year-old single woman attended counseling because of a relationship break-up and problems at work with colleagues. She explored how these difficulties were connected to her chronic anger, harsh criticism of others, and unwillingness to be vulnerable. She reported that people were afraid of her until she let them get to know the “real” her. The client discussed how she did not want to change and yet acknowledged that she was profoundly unhappy about the nature of her close relationships. Janna also discussed the tension with her older sister, who she always saw as the “perfect” child, while she remained the “blacksheep.”

Margo, a 45-year-old married professional woman attended counseling, because of the negative relationship with her 68-year-old mother. The client reported feelings of guilt and anger, which created the context for tearful evenings, rants to her husband, and excessive daily drinking to soothe her emotions. She discussed how her mother was demanding, dramatic, and abusive. Margo engaged in daily conversations with her mother after work, weekly visits to her home, and the “nightmare” associated with family gatherings.

Irene, a 67-year-old married woman began counseling after a medical doctor told her that she was in an emotionally abusive relationship with her husband. The client reported her experience of emptiness, frustration, and a loss of identity as a result of the relationship. Having given up a successful career as a professional early in their long-term marriage, she believed that she had “lost her soul.” She described their relational dynamic as one rife with emotional abuse and devoid of emotional closeness, something that she longed for deeply. Although she dreaded the thought of staying married, she felt equally afraid to leave her privileged life at her age.

These vignettes provide a snapshot into the lives of three women in different life stages and contexts. The common elements in each story are relationships and actions with key others. One way to understand these women and their issues can be drawn from a robust feminist perspective that has deep historical roots. However,

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newer theoretical advances, such as Contextual Action Theory (CAT) (e.g. Valach et al. 2002; Young et al. 2011), can be utilized as a meta-theory to examine how context, relationship, and action are integrated in clients' lives and in the therapeutic relationship. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss women and counseling by combining feminist perspectives and action theory. By doing this, I am hoping to expand the current discussion of feminist theory and counseling.

## Changing Perspectives of Theory and Therapy

In the past, many traditional psychotherapies, such as psychodynamic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, family counseling, and even person-centered therapy rarely considered gender, context, and power. In the three case vignettes above, each of the women clients may have found themselves labeled with terms such as angry, needy, or dependent. They may have been given multiple diagnoses based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Text Revision, 4th edition (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association 2004), including Borderline Personality Disorder, Anxiety Disorder with Panic, Major Depressive Disorder, or Dependent Personality Disorder. Even in humanistic forms of counseling issues of power, privilege, and oppression are typically absent. However, much has changed in the way we view women in psychotherapy today, largely due to the feminist movement that began in the 1960s that led us to new ways of understanding women's issues. This gendered perspective invited therapists to view women as strong, capable, and competent, despite inequality, oppression, and violence that might be present in their lives and in society (Popadiuk 2008).

Many of the grand theories of healthy human development, including those developed by Erik Erikson or Piaget, have been premised on ideas of male development, individuation, and autonomy. Instead of pathologizing women for their desire to stay connected in close relationships, a feminist lens provided a new theory of change that challenged traditional thinking espousing separation from others as the psychological marker of normality and maturity. In the three client vignettes at the beginning of this chapter, feminist theory and therapy, particularly Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan and Hartling 2002; Jordan et al. 1991; Walker 2011) shaped the case conceptualizations. Instead of working toward further isolating women from their primary relationships, clients were supported to explore how to renegotiate their relationships in a way in which they could be healthier and more vibrant, and how to honor their desire to be in connection, even when painful and no longer adaptive in the current configuration. In addition, gender, social expectations, and context were considered, as well as the client's strengths, successes, and healthy coping strategies. Therapy facilitated change, in part, by creating awareness and insight about how each woman used both connecting and disconnecting strategies to manage their close relationships. During the course of therapy, each of the three women learned more about how to listen to their own wisdom, participate in interconnected and healthier mutually empathic relationships, and understand the

broader societal context of women's roles. Although this strength-based approach may seem common to many counselors, the roots of this approach harkens back to early feminist principles that have been integrated into many of today's current practices.

In considering how an action theory perspective might provide an additional lens to the case conceptualization of these three clients, we can see that each woman was engaged in socially constructed processes with others and enacting intentional, goal-directed actions. Specifically, all three women were trying to figure out the meaning of their own and others' actions in light of the difficulties they were facing. The women's identities became apparent through the very interactions that created pain in their lives. For example, Janna acted out her identities in her gendered field of action, because she saw herself as helper of lost souls (friends), a victim of family dynamics (sister and mother), and a person who fears intimacy (coworkers and boy-friends). The relational dynamics created and maintained these identities, keeping Janna feeling stuck in re-enacting the same joint actions with others time and time again (Young et al. 2007). From these vignettes, we see that context, identity, and relationships provide women with the range of actions and joint actions with others that will be available to them in any given situation.

## Background of Feminist Theory and Therapy

Given that we have already known the background, purpose, and context of CAT from previous chapters, I will provide some background to feminist theory and therapy. In the 1960s until the 1980s, second wave feminist ideas flourished in Western society. Gloria Steinem, an activist, Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher and writer of *The Second Sex* (1952), and Bette Frieden, writer of *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) helped to create a surge of awareness about women and women's issues. Important discussions rose to the surface of society's consciousness including sexual liberation, increased career choices, and equal rights. Many feminists worked hard to change institutions like the family, laws, and government both here and abroad in order to fight sexual harassment, violence against women, reproductive rights, maternity pay, and other issues in both domestic and professional domains. During these early years there was a groundswell of grassroots interest in and support of these new ideas, which took hold in society as women began to demand more equality in their lives.

Starting in the 1980s, third-wave feminism developed and changed to include a broader focus on postmodern philosophy that embraced fluidity, multiple truths, and subjectivity (Enns 2010). Further, Bruns (2011) highlighted how baby boomers grew-up in two-career families with significant independence and the influence of television, and women began to experience an unprecedented freedom to choose amongst a wide variety of educational and professional options, as well as sexual relationships and family constellations. Today, many of our laws and social norms are grounded in feminist social change, such as equal pay for the same job (e.g. teachers),

nondiscrimination against married or aging women (e.g., flight attendants), nondiscrimination against people of color (e.g. renting apartments), laws related to job interviews and selection (e.g., marital status; pregnancy plans; number of children), reproductive rights (e.g., birth control pill; abortion), and shifts in marital arrangements (e.g., dual-income households; divorce; common-law relationships). Despite the fact that we experience these rights and freedoms as common sense or taken-for-granted, it took decades of protest and advocacy to change cultural attitudes, social mores, and structural and institutional barriers.

### *Feminist Therapy*

Differences in feminist thought began to arise in both academic and clinical circles. Despite different strands of feminism, many agreed on the core concepts and values of feminist therapy that have led to many positive changes in clinical services. Today, feminist concepts are embedded in many therapies, including consciousness raising in regard to societal barriers and social roles, collaborative decision-making, egalitarian counselor/client relationships, a focus on strengths and successes, and systemic influences on individual functioning (Brown 2004). Particularly, a feminist therapist may conceptualize a woman's presenting issue of depression as having a biological basis (e.g., a vulnerability or predisposition), but that the client's abusive relationship (e.g., violence against women), oppression at work in which she is underpaid and underemployed (e.g. hitting the "glass ceiling" or being in a "pink-collar" job), and historical childhood sexual abuse (e.g., sexual violence against women and children) have created and maintained the conditions necessary to trigger a major depression. If we consider the cases at the beginning of this chapter, individual problems can instead be contextualized within the larger systems of families, schools, workplaces, and governments.

Many feminist clinicians work from an integrated eclecticism based on core values and principles by focusing on a wide variety of strategies and interventions in order to raise awareness, link societal influences to individual distress, address social justice issues, and create a space for equality and respect (Brown 2004). Other clinicians practice from one or two primary theoretical orientations, but draw heavily from a feminist lens to inform how they approach women clients in therapy. For example, a feminist lens can be overlaid onto specific theoretical approaches, such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (Diaz-Martinez et al. 2010; Hurst and Genest 1995), Adlerian therapy (Healey and Craigen 2010), trauma treatment (Brown 2004; Webster and Dunn 2005), cultural formulation (Arthur and Popadiuk 2010), and psychodynamic therapy (Director 2002; Vasquez 2002). Finally, intersectionality theory posits that gender is only one of the multiple strands of personal identity (Constantine 2002), and can no longer be taken as a stand-alone construct. Instead, the intersection and valuing of multiple social locations need to be taken into account, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, ability level, age, and sexual orientation (Arthur and Popadiuk 2010; Croteau et al. 2002; Popadiuk 2008).

## **Counseling Women: Feminist Therapy and Contextual Action Theory**

CAT is a comprehensive perspective that provides an overriding framework for creating a new understanding that both enhances and extends current feminist counseling practices with women. Not only can action theory provide an additional way of explaining women's relationships and joint actions with others in their everyday lives, but the theory can also conceptualize the process that occurs between therapists and clients in the same way. As discussed in previous chapters, action theory can be used to examine the "actions," "projects," and "careers" that women bring to a therapeutic setting. In the next section, I will focus on expanding Margo's vignette from the beginning of this chapter as a way of demonstrating how action theory can be used as a compatible, but overriding framework when working with woman from a feminist perspective.

### ***The Case of Margo and Her Mother***

Margo, the second client from the opening of this chapter, struggled for most of her life with a highly conflictual mother–daughter relationship based on a power-over relationship that did not shift as Margo matured. Margo reported that her mother continued to use the same strategies of guilt, manipulation, and tantrums in order to control Margo's behavior that she used when Margo was a child. On the other hand, Margo was not able to change her own strategies or develop new ones, and, thus, continued the relationship in the way it was set up in her childhood. This relationship dynamic, as described by Margo, could be conceptualized as one based on disempowerment, emotional abuse, and "crazymaking." Sadly, both women could be seen as powerless, victimized, and acting out to find some semblance of personal power—her mother through her bitterness, anger, guilt, and manipulation; Margo through depression, anxiety, problem drinking, and hopelessness.

In thinking about this case, feminist and action theories align along the dimensions of relationship, context, expectations, goals, and empowerment. Margo and her mother each sought power in order to make attempts to change the other. Relationally, both perspectives might see that the mother–daughter relationship is the key focus and that Margo's relationship with her mother would need to be renegotiated if Margo wants to empower herself and alleviate pain. Both theories would seek to empower Margo by working with her on examining and changing her expectations, and learning to accept that her mother may be doing the best she can relationally given her own upbringing and experiences. Further, both action and feminist theories would work with the client to create new goals, such as redefining and changing her actions and interactions with her mother. Action theory informed counselors would also help Margo to recognize her emotions when engaging with her mother and to identify the actions that stem from her emotional memories. She would also work on disentangling these negative emotions from her current actions.



Margo would further recognize the joint projects she participates in with her mother and learn other possible and more constructive projects in accordance with her values and long-term goals. Relational empowerment, an important concept in both theories, focuses on how each person in the relationship creates, maintains, and changes the power dynamic through relational interactions (Lynam and Young 2002). Overall, counselors working from a feminist perspective would be aligned with the overarching tenets of action theory, although the ideas and language to describe what is happening and why, are different.

### ***Joint Action Between Margo and Her Mother***

At the micro level, action theory looks at individual and joint actions that happen between people. Questions that may arise in Margo's case, include, "What happens in the phone calls every night?" or "What are the individual actions that make-up the joint actions that ostensibly contribute to the relationship?" A feminist therapist with an action theory meta-perspective might ask to hear the story of the relationship between Margo and her mother in order to learn about the meaning that she is ascribing to various aspects of her life. These stories might describe how the relationship with her mother is problematic, that she has had to parent her mother throughout her life, and that both mother and daughter get trapped by old relational dynamics—good child wanting love/abusive mother withholding love. Each of these individual thoughts, feelings, and actions has contributed to a sense of helplessness. Margo no longer wants to be in this relationship project, but does not know how to extricate herself or, metaphorically, to change the dance. Thus, a therapist who followed action theory as an overriding framework might unpack the relational connections and disconnections between Margo and her mother by first exploring the specific joint actions (i.e., a single event, thought, or action). In this case, it might include one telephone call to her mother, or the time that Margo took her mother for lunch for her birthday, or what Margo tells herself and others after each interaction. However, first of all, Margo would have to recognize which joint project she is engaged in with her mother, which one she wants to participate in, and how she wants to change it. Margo would need to decide which project would be feasible and constructive given the time of her life as an independent adult woman.

### ***Many Joint Actions Create a Project***

From an action theory point of view, the individual joint actions, when combined, create a mother–daughter relationship project. A therapist might encourage Margo to see how similar joint actions come together over time to create a variety of mother–daughter relational projects. In addition to the larger "mother-daughter project," there might be a "caretaking and health project" in which Margo has been the main source of support in her mother's medical care, or "the extended family project," in

which the family each plays their roles in relation to their matriarch of the family. Action theory, therefore, can extend feminist thinking by providing a time-oriented framework that can help clients make meaning of individual and joint projects over a specific span of time.

In deepening the work with Margo, she might begin to question the meaning of the relationship with her mother, and consider how this project fits into her other projects, for example, her own family, a successful career, and being an avid reader. At the point of contact with the therapist, the mother–daughter project negatively impacted and interfered with the many other projects in Margo’s life that provided her with energy, passion, and contentment. However, Margo seemed to be most shaken by how this mother–daughter project played out with her identity project: “I can’t be a woman, a daughter, a person unless I give myself over to my mother regardless of the costs to me and those I love.” In other words, relationship and action are intricately tied to identity. Each night Margo was upset when talking to her mother, but then she became even more unraveled in her “friendship project” and “husband project” when she talked for hours about her mother each night. Something in the mother–daughter relationship project became enacted that she was unable to process, and thus, was unable to take action to regulate the emotional upheaval. Thus, her expectations (individual action) that her mother will finally accept, appreciate, and love her (joint action) continued to plague her.

### ***Many Relational Projects Over a Lifetime Create a Career***

In the third major component of the CAT framework, we look at combining the relational projects between mother and daughter over the course of a lifetime, which create a relational career (e.g., many projects related to mother and daughter interactions from childhood to old age). This way of chunking individual actions, thoughts, and behaviors into larger and larger chunks helps clinicians to conceptualize how actions over time are interrelated and have a goal, conscious or not, related to an overriding project or lifetime career at the core. Thus, in considering Margo and her mother, there is a lifetime of joint actions (e.g., events) that can be made more manageable, and meaningful, when chunked together to create many comprehensive projects (e.g., short stories), and then further brought together to create careers (e.g. a novel).

### ***The Therapeutic Relationship***

Many feminist researchers and clinicians agree on the core concepts and values of feminist therapy, such as mutual respect, egalitarian counselor/client relationships, strengths-focus, and systemic influences (Brown 2004; Popadiuk 2004). Similarly, action theory would purport to uphold these same values, especially the idea of an egalitarian relationship between the counselor and client, where two people are

working together to co-create new joint actions toward the unfolding of a more robust project. Together, the counselor and client collaborate and work toward developing the client's potential, using her strengths to create movement out of the current difficulty, and understanding problems as having multiple, intersecting, and contextual facets.

The counselor–client relational project represented an important series of goal-directed actions in all of the vignettes posed at the beginning of this chapter. These relational projects took the individual joint actions that occurred between the counselor and client in each session, and then across sessions, to form a unit of meaning. These joint actions between the counselor and client are two systems, the joint and the individual processes, and include communication, emotional monitoring and energizing, steering, control and regulation processes, goals, actions steps, and action elements (Valach et al. 2002). For Irene, the 67-year old woman in an abusive relationship, the mutually empathic communication that occurred between the counselor and the client led to changes in how the client experienced herself. Instead of feeling invalidated from an emotionally abusive partner, Irene began to experience acceptance, respect, and empathy first from the counselor—and then as she learned to integrate these messages—from herself. Together, the counselor and client explored the emotional and cognitive steering processes that triggered the client, and together, they worked at changing the meaning from “I’m worthless and no one loves me” to “I am a worthy human being and can take actions to stop others from abusing me.” Irene and the counselor experienced hundreds of joint actions together over the course of a year, a solid “counselor-client relational project” that served to empower the client and provide a safe, empathic space from which to explore and grow. This collaborative and empowering journey resulted in significant changes in the client’s identity and major shifts in her relational projects with her husband, daughter, and friends.

Part of the function of the client–counselor relationship is to hold a space for collaborative self-construction to occur. Similar to Irene, Janna and the counselor, through many complex joint actions over time, worked on a counselor–client project of re-defining Janna’s identity, or identity project, from the “blacksheep” and “mean girl,” to an authentic identity of “strong woman who respects herself and others.” Rather than maintaining a power-over stance with other people in her life, Janna learned through the individual joint actions within the counselor-client project that she could be vulnerable and not be hurt, and be respectful without being weak. Everything that occurred in therapy worked toward the overriding goal of assisting Janna in re-defining the meaning of her actions, thoughts, and emotions in such a way that she could empower herself. The more Janna took actions in sessions with the counselor, the more she was able to try out new actions in her relational world at work and at home. She successfully transformed previous projects, and in some cases careers, by creating new joint actions with co-workers, supervisors, and family members. The types of communication elements and joint actions in therapy arose from a feminist theoretical orientation based in mutual respect, empathy, and empowerment. The framework of joint actions, project, and careers provided a structure and meta-theory upon which the relational work was built.

## Conclusion

Both feminist theory and CAT are similar and embedded in ideas of empowerment, relationships, actions, expectations, and goals. However, what action theory adds to feminist theory and practice is a language and meta-framework that describes the processes of how individual joint actions create larger projects over time, and finally, how multiple projects over a lifespan create a career. Action theory provides us with a superordinate construct of what is going on in any given project at any given point of time. Its differentiated language helps in understanding everyday processes of clients, the counseling process, and the interventions. Overall, the addition of action theory serves to expand and strengthen the framework of feminist therapy, which in turn, serves to further empower women in therapy.

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# Chapter 18

## Suicide and Counseling for Suicidality

Ladislav Valach and Richard A. Young

Counseling a person whom counselors consider at risk for suicide is a very challenging task. The appropriate counseling procedures are debatable—the number of intervention studies that show a positive outcome for suicide preventive treatment is low (Linehan 2008) and the risks are large. While the stakes in many other counseling discussions about optimal treatments are mostly economical, such as the merits of short-term or long-term interventions, the stakes in suicide counseling are substantial—the eventual loss of a human life. The World Health Organization indicates that suicide is a problem in many countries (<http://www.who.int/topics/suicide/en/>). Moreover, the number of completed suicides must be multiplied many times (10–20 fold) to estimate the number of attempted suicides, which again represents only a segment of the number of people who considered suicide, at least once. Given the challenge and gravity of counseling clients who are suicidal, looking beyond some of the current and widespread assumptions about suicide and suicidality treatment is warranted. It is also very reasonable to pose anew two main questions, namely, how to understand suicide and how to treat and counsel a suicidal person.

Goal-directed action, addressed extensively in this book, has provided us with a perspective from which we can look beyond the widespread assumptions about suicidality and its treatment. Elsewhere, we outlined a conceptualization of suicide based on cases and proposed how the treatment of suicidality can be developed (Valach et al. 2011). The present chapter is another stepping stone in formulating the contextual action theory informed approach to the counseling and treatment of clients experiencing suicidal ideation and intentions. Specifically, we describe how suicide is seen from the perspective of contextual action theory and then use the five tasks of counseling identified elsewhere in this book to frame the application of this perspective to counseling clients addressing issues of suicide. We also summarize

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some of our published and unpublished research findings about the proposed suicide conceptualization.

What is suicide and suicidal behavior? Although the terms *suicidality* and *suicide* have clear meanings and the professional definition on which the law is based is also fairly precise, we should remember that from the standpoint of contextual action theory, suicide, suicidality, and counseling clients who are suicidal are complex and interrelated processes that can be seen from different perspectives. The subjective view is the perspective of the person who shows suicidal behavior or expresses suicidal intention or wishes. The social view is that of the significant others who consider the person suicidal, the latter either representing or not representing the personal intention. Finally, relevant professionals (the professional view) consider a person to be suicidal according to their criteria irrespective of whether or not the layperson or the target person thinks so as well. Thus, suicidality is, in the light of contextual action theory, not exclusively defined by one key variable or concept.

## **Suicidality from the Perspective of Contextual Action Theory**

Contextual action theory views suicide as a goal-directed action, and thus a process that is embedded in a social context, draws upon one's history in the form of memory, and is enacted through different types of sub processes. Each is explored here.

### ***Suicidal Processes***

Before a particular client's goal-directed suicidal processes can be addressed and counseling take place, a general understanding of these processes is important. Suicidal processes can be seen in terms of goal-directed action (Michel and Valach 1997; Valach et al. 2002b). This view, however simple as it may seem, contradicts many theories and established professional codifications, which see suicide as caused illness behavior (Asberg et al. 1986; Esquirol 1965/1838; Merian 1763; see also Valach 2011). These theories offer some advantages. They freed our understanding of suicide from its moral underpinning with which it was viewed for many centuries. They recognized the necessity of treating suicidality in a setting that calls for a mental health definition of suicide. Obviously, many patients who took their own lives had been given a diagnosis of psychosis and were admitted at least once to a psychiatric hospital (Bertolote and Fleischmann 2002). However, many others, in fact the majority of suicidal people are never given a diagnosis of a mental illness (such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia) as only a small number (7–10%) of those who attempted suicide are among those who die of suicide (Jenkins et al. 2002; Carter et al. 2007). At the same time, only a small portion of people with a mental disorder diagnosis is suicidal (Bostwick 2000). These theories opened the

door to the scientific inquiry of suicidality. They also helped in having suicide accepted within the conception of “everything that had happened had a cause.”

Nevertheless, clients’ stories and narratives of suicide are about action processes, projects and longer-term involvements such as career. This is the case even when clients maintain that their attitude to suicide is a negative one, that they did not want to kill themselves, but the impulse to take their own lives suddenly came upon them or that they do not remember what happened. Using terminology informed by contextual action theory in qualifying suicide processes (Michel and Valach 2001), we not only see human behavior in different terms but also connected to a different professional tradition in human disciplines such as psychology (James 1890/1950; Miller et al. 1960; Bruner 1990; Harre and Secord 1972; Vygotsky 1978), psychiatry (Jaspers 1913/1963; Schafer 1976), philosophy (Brentano 1874; Searle 1969, 1990; Wittgenstein 1953/2001) and social sciences (Schutz 1962, 1964, 1966; Weber 1947). It also is of interest to note that, in the past 30 years, neurology has contributed substantially to the action theoretical view (Malle et al. 2001; Meiser 2004; Noë 2004). The purpose of using contextual action theory to understand suicide is not to find its cause but to identify a systemic and sequential order of suicidal processes, such as actions and projects. Moreover, at the same time as they are working with clients who may be suicidal, counselors are also engaged in the goal-directed systems of their own professional career and projects as well as in the systems of their own organization, agency, and other professional bodies. Thus, the counselor has to identify and be aware of the complex systemic order of the joint processes involved in counseling.

Our view is that working within and on these systems occurs in a contextual-constructionist way (Young and Collin 2004). The contextual stance recognizes the rich, complex environments that surround the target process, in this case the suicide process. These environments are functionally connected. The contextual stance also postulates that the meaning of the target processes changes as their contexts change. Their meaning is not defined in a physical and definitive manner. Put another way, constructionist counselors understand that clients as well as counselors are continually constructing their social reality (Young and Valach 2004; Young et al. 2008). Furthermore, this construction happens in joint social actions, projects, and careers. The majority of processes counselors deal with is joint processes. Thus, it is important to assert from the beginning that the relational perspective in counseling is very appropriate (Blustein et al. 2004; Schultheiss 2003; Valach and Young 2009). This relational view impacts how we see processes—our ontology, that is, it is the relationship between “things” and not the individual “things” that is relevant. This view also reflects our epistemology, that is, how we understand the process of obtaining information about the targeted phenomena; and our ethics, that is, what is the basis for acting in these relationships.

Contextual action theory provides an important perspective on suicide and suicidality. It helps counselors to establish the client’s life-enhancing goal-directed orientation during and following the treatment of suicidality. To realize this outcome, a deeper understanding of suicidal processes in the terms of contextual action theory is required.



## *Suicide as Goal-Directed Processes*

Considering what we know about suicide processes and about naive observation, we can assume that if naive observers observed short-term suicidal behavior of a person (the suicidal act) they would describe it in terms of goals. The action of a person cutting his wrists deeply or overdosing on drugs is readily understood in relation to the goal of taking one's own life. This would also be the case even if observing the mid- and long-term behavior of a person who is suicidal. Naive observers assume that actors have goals in order to describe their behavior in terms of goal-directed processes (Heider 1958; Vallacher and Wegner 1987). Their accounts take the form of descriptions of the actor's action, project, and/or career. These shared attributions are occasionally addressed in social cognition research (Fiske and Taylor 2008) or social representation conceptualizations (Moscovici and Markova 1998). Partly because of this socially anchored and shared understanding of suicide processes, we also find a comparable conceptualization in the subjective perspective of the actors themselves (von Cranach and Valach 1983; Valsiner and van der Veer 2000). That is, people who are suicidal also describe their own suicide-related behavior in terms of goal-directed processes.

Empirical evidence for this postulate is provided in a study in which 39 persons who had attempted suicide were interviewed regarding their attempt (Valach et al. 2002a). To collect information on the subjective processes in suicidal actions and projects, we engaged the participants in an interview with video supported recall of the action processes (the interview) recorded on video. To obtain data on social meaning, we relied on naive observation (Valach et al. 2006) and the subjective processes from the self-confrontation interview (Valach et al. 2002a). Through video-recording, we also gathered data on manifest behavior which provided the opportunity for professional systematic observation. In essence, the naive observers and the participants themselves taught us that the target processes could be seen as goal-directed processes in short-, mid-, and long-term forms. We were also able to integrate this knowledge into systematic observation and conceive an observational system that allowed us to address the systemic organization of these goal-directed processes fully.

The basis of our analysis of these data was as follows. At the highest level of the suicide process, we assumed a goal in order to define a unit of analysis—an action. At the middle level, we described the ongoing manifest and subjective processes in term of their functions in regard to the goals. Finally, at the lowest level of the systemic organization, we registered all the physical properties of such ongoing behavior in categories of space, time, and sound. This system was used in understanding, describing and coding the ongoing processes in their short-term, mid-term, and long-term forms. In addition, we know that the majority of actions and projects are joint processes, thus we had to conceptualize and monitor individual as well as joint actions, which we did in describing such joint actions as two systems of individual and joint processes (individual goals/joint goals, individual cognitive-emotional

processes/joint communication, individual functions/joint functions related to the joint goal, and so forth).

Following these methodological procedures, we arrived at a conception of suicidal processes as systems of socially meaningful, goal-directed, cognitive-emotionally and communicatively organized embedded joint actions, projects and long-term career. Although researchers and clinicians often can follow suicidal projects and careers, they seldom have the opportunity of monitoring suicidal actions first hand. They can occasionally read about the naive observation of suicidal actions provided by witnesses and can assume some correspondence between subjective processes immediately prior a suicide action and the reports people who have attempted or completed suicide leave in their good-bye letters or notes (Leenaars 1988, 2004). Consequently, the major source of information on ongoing suicide processes is the actors' narratives. Of particular relevance and high ecological validity are narratives collected in a setting that is part of a suicide project such as narratives generated in an encounter in a crisis center or hospital where the people are hospitalized after their suicide attempt. Studying such narratives from interviews, we were able to show that the actors described their suicide processes organized in the terms discussed above (Valach et al. 2002b). Consider the following example described extensively in that publication.

### ***Suicide Actions, Project and Career in a Narrative After an Incomplete Suicide Act***

The woman described the following suicide attempt action and subactions (taking an overdose):

'Husband leaves', 'Woman seeks support' (trying to call three colleagues), 'Considers the means of suicide', 'Reasons about suicide' ("*I don't know how to live without him*"), 'Takes an overdose of drugs', and 'Waits for death', 'She was found and taken to hospital'.

This and other descriptions of suicide actions are clear descriptions of goal-directed actions, not of reactive behavior. The participants in this study described an interaction, cognition, emotion or pain prior to the suicidal action, their state of mind while deciding to take this step, their dealing with the means of suicide, their fantasies about future, and the way they were interrupted in realizing the results of their action. But first of all they mentioned a clear goal, goal consideration and goal setting processes. In many cases the participants described intensive monitoring (cognitive, emotional, sensation) prior to the suicide action but reduced or altered monitoring during their action itself. We find a clear goal steering this action, a series of action steps, some references to action elements and structural properties of that action, for example, how many pills were taken, what time it was, how deep the wound was, and so forth. The descriptions of the suicide actions included references to the embedding of these actions in larger projects—either in a suicide, relationship, or self-esteem project, or some other project. This conceptualization allows us to

understand the motivation that emerges when actions are connected to super-ordinate goal-directed processes (Averill and Nunley 1992).

The same participant described the following suicide project and actions containing the following actions prior to the action of suicide (Valach et al. 2002b):

‘Husband proposes leaving her’, ‘She leaves as usual for holidays’, ‘Husband announces his departure’.

This participant saw her suicide attempt as part of a whole project in which her husband indicated his intention to leave her. She mentioned that her husband’s intention to start a relationship with another woman was very relevant to her suicide project. Adjoined is a project of visiting a friend and her godchild that could have been instrumental in strengthening her husband’s extramarital relationship project. A rejected proposal to renew their relationship also played a relevant role in this suicide project.

Clients often see suicide actions as part of suicide projects, in which other actions or considerations were undertaken to realize the project goal. In some other cases, a suicide action is part of a project with a different goal. In this study, all the participants saw their action as a part of a suicide or other project. The woman referred to above listed the following projects as a part of her suicide career (Valach et al. 2002b):

‘Personal identity project’ (participant describes herself as a bit depressed, not very sociable and not very spontaneous), ‘Previous suicide project considerations’ (20 years ago).

The woman described a suicide career and related her identity projects to it in order to make her suicide attempt understandable. She maintained that there is not a direct correspondence between her action and her identity projects but there was an illness project in that she considered a suicide action.

In describing a suicide-attempt action and the related projects, the participants in this study also referred to a suicide career in which their suicide actions and projects were integrated. These included an illness career, a depression career, family and other relationship careers as well as pain and drug abuse careers, and many others. The careers were mostly characterized by long term goals, either as freely chosen targets or in a course of coping with consequences of an event. The career was characterized by including multiple others and often involved an institutional anchoring. Time (duration) and situational features were given. Long-term cognitions and emotions were also described. Next to steering and monitoring processes we also found control and regulating processes.

### ***Suicide Processes Are Joint Actions, Projects, and Career***

Suicide processes are joint processes. Analyzing the 39 narratives conducted during the hospital stay after a suicide attempt, we found that there were no narratives that did not refer to the involvement of others (Valach et al. 2006b). Suicide and suicide attempts are often undertaken because of relationship disappointments but the conclusion that suicide should be treated in a relational manner has not been drawn.

The following examples are taken from a previous publication in which we described the social nature of suicidal processes (Valach et al. 2006b).

The long-term processes of relationship careers were reported in the participants' narratives as influential in their suicide actions and projects. These relationships often included parents, such as described by a 17-year-old woman:

The participant maintains that she has a problem with her parents. Her father, who left the family when she was 3 years old, was promising things all the time, such as that he is going to take her to the movies, but he never showed up. He returned a year ago and is living with them now. He is a Moslem and according to his ideas a girl of the daughter's age is not allowed to have a boy friend and go out. His daughter complains that he drinks when he has a problem. When he is drunk he comes home and tries to explain to her that he loves her and that is too much for her, because she does not consider him to be her father. She feels that when her parents have a problem her mother "takes it out" on her. Her mother had stomach reduction surgery and now she is depressed and tense.

For the majority of participants, their partners were involved, as illustrated in the narrative of a woman in her early 20s about her boyfriend:

The woman mentioned that she was relying on her boyfriend a lot because she went through three sexual abuse attempts when she was 6, 15, and 16 years of age. She felt that he would not abuse her, but she found that he was misusing her trust. Two months ago an abusive incident nearly happened again. This time it was his best friend.

The relationship careers also included spouses, as illustrated in the narrative of a male participant in his early 30s:

The man reported that his wife did not feel well. He complained that she listened to loud music and did not watch television. He cooked all of the time. After some time, she said that he should go. She said that he destroyed her. Once they went to the cemetery, to the grave of his aunt and she suddenly started screaming and crying. She said again and again that he had destroyed her.

The participants' narrated stories of the suicide attempt were embedded mostly in relationship projects. These projects are parts of the relationship careers described above. The relationship projects, including the breaking up of relationships, were often influential in the participants' crises. However, sometimes they proved to be life supporting. For example, although an 18-year-old participant considered suicide, she would not attempt it because of a relationship she had. Also of interest are situations in which relationship projects functioned in such a way that the persons felt unable to communicate their urgent problems.

### ***To Whom Do People Speak Before and After Their Incomplete Suicidal Act?***

The understanding of the social nature of suicide processes leads us to both a better conceptualization of these processes and better suicide prevention. We described the social contacts following the incomplete suicide action in a previous publication from which the examples are taken (Valach et al. 2007).

A teenage woman experienced a number of relationship disappointments embedded in an unsatisfactory home situation, complicated by a multicultural background:

‘Last call.’ The woman describes her getting in touch with her best girlfriend and openly discussing her suicide intentions. Although this friend was well meant telling her to be reasonable, to calm down and sending her to sleep this did not prove efficient to inhibit her suicide intention.

‘Saying goodbye to her mother.’ Prior to her suicide attempt, the woman shows her mother how desolate she feels. Her mother recognizes that her daughter has problems but is unable to intervene, as their communicative relationship is complicated. The woman declines her offer to talk and her mother does not try any further.

‘Talking to her mother after the suicide action’, ‘Mother’s response to her daughter’s suicide attempt.’ The mother’s reaction represents their relationship of mistrust. However, receiving proof of her daughter’s suicidal intentions, she acts according to the possible risks.

‘Encounter with woman’s father after the suicide attempt.’ Her father, on the other hand, seems to be out of touch with what is going on at home and what the adequate reactions should be. His lack of language competence may play a role.

‘Talks by a third party after the suicide attempt.’ She reports conversations between her mother, her friend, and her former boyfriend who were very important to her.

‘A young woman and her boyfriend’s interaction after her suicide attempt.’ The woman’s girlfriend attempted to restore the broken relationship between the woman and her boyfriend, which caused so much distress to her. The intervention of her mother and her girlfriend led to a call of her boyfriend. However, it was not satisfactory to the young woman. Nevertheless, the patient acknowledges that she managed to have a good exchange with her mother.

The whole process around this participant’s suicide attempt is accompanied by her contacts with other people significant in her life. The encounters with them did not help her but served the other people to justify their position prior to the participant’s suicide attempt.

The action theoretical view of suicide processes helps us in indicating the systemic organization of actions, projects and careers of suicide, in realizing the social nature of suicide processes, and thus helping us to see suicidal processes in relational terms. Finally, this view points to the high suicide prevention potential that can be realized when the potential contact persons of people who are suicidal are instructed in understanding suicide. The above examples illustrate that suicide process is a shared and joint goal-directed process of actions, projects and careers in which other people are seen as playing a crucial role. They are often the last and first persons, persons who are suicidal talk to before and after a suicide attempt.

### ***Emotional Childhood Experience in Suicide Processes***

Childhood experiences are an important part of a suicidal career. People who have attempted suicide often report that their childhood experiences with others had left them with disturbing memories. Some of them also consider these experiences and memories as relevant for their suicide action. Consider the following four cases from Valach et al. (2006b).

- A young man, 18 years of age, talks about his biological mother who left him when he was 7 years old and does not want to hear from him. Despite his attempts, he managed to see her only twice. His father, who is alcoholic, is not present. His adoptive parents, his aunt and uncle, are described as showing indifference, lacking feeling, but high on discipline. The young man experiences many conflicts. His feeling of being rejected is very strong.
- A middle age woman described the loss of her mother who left the family when the woman was 7 years old. Her mother said that she was going to a spa, but left the family with another man. The fear of being left behind is very intrusive.
- When a young women, 17 years of age, was 3 years old her father left the family. He promised several times that he is going to visit her, take her to the cinema, but he never came. The woman described this emotional relationship as unstable, insecure, indifferent, and disappointing. Later in boarding school she felt discarded. The fear of being rejected was very acute.
- A young woman, addicted to drugs, HIV positive, described her unstable family situation and how her brother sexually abused her when she was 13 years old. She feared the feeling being disrespected.

These reports indicate a presence of negative emotional memories, which the participants related to their suicide careers. The emotional processes anchored in these memories should be attended to in understanding suicide and should be addressed in the counseling and treatment for suicide.

### ***Top–Down and Bottom–Up Steering in Suicide***

An emotional memory of feeling worthless and the desire to disappear, when actualized are often a part of the subjective experience in a suicide action. To account for such processes within the goal-directed processes described above, we describe the situations in which the action is steered by top–down strategies, as is common in goal-directed processes. In suicide, top–down steering strategies are complemented by bottom-up steering strategies (Valach et al. 2006a). We indicated that suicidal people process suicide-related and life-related projects and careers in parallel ways. We hypothesized that the links between suicide-related and life-related processes may occur in one of two ways. First, the link may be organized as “top-down” steering and control in which both sets of processes are linked within the explicit goal-directed system. Here, the person may have decided at some previous time to attempt suicide. The link is clear to the person at the time of the attempt and seemingly rational. This type of link is anchored conceptually in the goal-directed perspective described above.

Secondly, the link to suicidal processes can also reflect bottom-up steering or control of a suicide action by the person attempting suicide. In this case, the suicide action is described as starting with smaller component parts of the action and gradually building up to larger units. The action can be contrasted to top-down processes that begin with larger units and then proceed to smaller ones. In bottom-up

processes, the links occur in processes of a lower order in goal-directed action, that is, in words, phrases, movements, images, perception of environmental features, or sudden feelings rather than goals or long-term plans. This perspective captures unconscious processes or responds to a momentary pull or impulse that is critical in some suicide attempts. Bottom-up steering is reflected in the terms “affective,” “emotional” or “impulsive” suicide (Simon et al. 2001; Williams et al. 1980). This perspective is captured in dynamic systems theory (Vallacher and Nowak 1997). However, it is important to keep in one’s mind that suicides are seldom rational in the full sense of the word, that there is no action without affective processes involved and that what is often called affective action is a goal-directed action after all. The following examples are taken from Valach et al. (2006a) in which a more detailed description of this view is presented.

### **Top–Down Links Between Ongoing Life Processes and Suicide Actions**

This case of a middle-aged woman demonstrates the top-down link between ongoing life processes and suicide actions.

**Life-Related Actions that Preceded the Suicide Attempt Action** The woman describes her husband writing to her that he is reconsidering their relationship and will not come home and how, despite this information she continued to do her household chores.

**The Link** The woman indicates that she had made the decision to take her own life a long time ago. Only the last straw that broke the camel’s back was missing. Her husband’s informing her that he couldn’t stand it any longer and that is why he was leaving was the last straw. She was expecting this (Valach et al. 2006a).

**Suicide Attempt Action** The woman describes how she has prepared everything for her suicide a half a year ago, how she proceeded during the day of her suicide, how she only remembers that someone was trying to insert a stomach probe.

The action that preceded the suicide attempt was the woman’s husband leaving her. The link was, as she indicated, that she had decided a long time ago to die by suicide. She also prepared the necessary means for her suicide act and was only waiting for a situation to arise, which would give her the “last push.” This situation occurred when her husband indicated that he wanted to leave her. Then she proceeded in a controlled way, took precautions, made sure that the details would not get out of hand after her death, and took pills. In her narrative, the link between her life-maintaining processes and the suicide goal-directed system was a goal-directed, top-down process.

### **Bottom–Up Link Between Ongoing Life Processes and Suicide Actions**

This case demonstrates the bottom-up link between ongoing life processes and suicide actions of a middle-aged woman.

**Life-Related Actions that Preceded the Suicide Attempt Action** The woman described a feeling of internal restlessness. She asked her sister whether she could visit her because she was not able to go to work as she was frightened that she might faint. She was afraid of fainting and never waking up again. She felt challenged by her thoughts. She asked herself what it means to die, where would she go if she or one of her children died. In the morning she was afraid of going into water. It was pulling her. Her son had to go to school and so they went together. He was on his bike and she went by car. He took a short cut and she did not see it. She felt very bad because she did not know whether she was going to see him and that she had not said good-bye. She was afraid of parting and had difficulties saying goodbye to her daughter in the morning. Her mother left the family for a spa when the woman was a child and she never saw her again. She went to her sister's and did not realize what was happening. She was frightened that she would do something to herself without being able to control it. She reported having very many thoughts that put her under pressure so that she felt she may become disoriented. She said that she doesn't want her children to have a disordered mother whom they have to visit in psychiatry. Rather no mother at all. She reported wanting to tell her sister that if she was not in control of her senses and health, she should switch off the life support machines. She doesn't want anybody to suffer because she is mentally and physically dependent on others. She talked to her stepmother and she said something about suicide and the woman promised her that she was not going to do anything, but she was not able to concentrate. She felt restless and disorganized mentally. She knew that she would have to occupy herself otherwise she would be restless. So she was sorting bills and wondered why she is doing so because it is not necessary. When she finished she still felt restless and did not know what to do. Her sister offered her yoghurt. She was eating bilberry yoghurt, which she ate it with distaste, as she does not like it. She did it just to keep occupied. She realized that she was very restless. Her sister had a terrace and the door was opened. She had the feeling that it should be closed.

**Link** She reported that she felt being driven outside, that someone wanted her to jump or she herself wanted to jump.

**Suicide Attempt Action** She reported that she did not remember anything. She was told that she got up after the yoghurt and walked to the terrace and jumped, as if this was the clearest thing. Her sister saw it at the last moment, asked what she was doing, but she had already jumped. It is about a 10–15 m drop (Example from Valach et al. 2006a).

The actions that preceded the suicide attempt involved the woman trying to gain control over her thoughts. In the link, she was challenged by thoughts, feeling restless and disorganized, and losing control. She felt she was being driven outside and to jump. The internal process that directed her actions was the experience of mental disorganization. Both of these represent bottom-up processes. However, this suicide process was integrated into a suicide project, which she described in her narrative, for example, dealing with the issue that “better no mother than a mother in a psychiatric clinic.”



In our analysis of the descriptions of the links, that is, how the clients changed the course of their actions from life-oriented to death-oriented, we were able to distinguish three types of links following the “top-down” and “bottom-up” typology described earlier (Valach et al. 2006a). First, most links reflected a “top-down” steering and control, characteristic for goal-directed processes (in 17 of 39 cases). These research participants reported a conscious decision to attempt a suicide, including having the goal to attempt suicide and the choice of means. Second, bottom-up links occurred in 9 of 39 cases. Finally, in some cases in our study the suicide action seemed to be launched by a mixture of “top-down” and “bottom-up” processes (in 12 of 39 cases). In these cases, the person used goal considerations that led to an action step (as in top down processes) as well as engaged in the suicide process without a clear goal, including what the end state of the action was (as in bottom-up processes). In our sample we found that more women than men (30% vs. 14%) reported bottom-up links and more men than women (53% vs. 39%) reported top-down links. The distribution of mixed links across gender was about equal (women: 31%; men 33%).

## **Responding to the Suicidal Client**

Earlier in this book (Chap. 9) we identified five counseling tasks that we consider the primer for counselors working from a contextual action theory view. These tasks are now discussed in regard to counseling a client who is suicidal.

### ***Counseling’s First Task: Creating and Maintaining the Working Alliance***

Creating and maintaining a working alliance (Michel and Jobes 2010) is fostered with clients who are suicidal in two particular ways. First, it is important to see suicidal processes in terms of joint, goal-directed systems of actions, projects, and careers. As we have argued, social reality is constructed as joint goal-directed processes. Thus, it is relevant for counselors to reflect on the way they jointly construct the social reality of clients who are suicidal because these clients will take this construction to their lives outside the counseling office. If counselors want clients to act in a self-responsible, goal-directed way, facilitating their own life-enhancing projects, counselors have to treat them in their joint encounters in that way. Counselors have to strive for joint goal-directed action in the encounter, to give clients all the necessary space to enable them to construct their narratives in terms of goal-directed systems, and to support their life enhancing projects and career that follow the counseling encounters.

Secondly, creating and maintaining the working alliance relies on recognizing and acknowledging clients’ emotions experienced when they address what we call

“life-career issues.” These emotional experiences, such as experiencing rejection or being threatened by parents, are relevant for their future life (Michel et al. 2004). We were able to report that when therapists apply a sensitive strategy, that is, address clients’ emotions related to their reported key life-career issues, the clients believe that the therapist is helping them, that the interview is helping them, that the therapist understands them, and that they are working together with the therapist in a joint effort. All of the preceding client perceptions indicate the importance of joint efforts in creating a successful encounter, the importance of relating the various goal-directed systems to each other—action, project and career as in the case of life-career—and, finally, of letting the client outline the goal-directed system rather than providing the client with a schema for how such narratives should be developed, and connecting with clients through emotions related to life-career issues related emotions. However, the following four counseling tasks contribute equally to, and are important prerequisites for, the working alliance.

### ***Counseling’s Second Task: Linking Counseling and Life Facilitating Processes***

The important processes in lives of clients who are suicidal are those experienced prior to counseling and those that will continue after counseling, hopefully in improved ways. “A key step in creating the link between the client-counselor encounter and the client’s previous and future actions, projects, and career is by providing a space for an extensive client narrative.” (Young et al. 2011, p. 30) The counselor takes care that the narrative of the client who is suicidal is developed according to how the client sees action in the context of his or her communication community. Narratives about suicide and suicide attempts are socio-cultural constructions and should reflect the socio-cultural context. This use of the common sense action theory, that is, how the client sees action, in the counseling session of clients who are suicidal provides the link between the life outside counseling and in the counseling session. In this way, counselors can become a part of the joint goal-directed processes clients who are suicidal bring with them. In addition, counselors can also use their professional knowledge in these systems to support these clients in pursuing their life-facilitating and socially constructive goals. The self-confrontation interview can be used as a powerful means for this task. It can assist in the process of linking counseling and life facilitating processes by both recalling of thoughts and feelings during the recorded action of counseling after a suicide attempt and reflecting on how these feelings are integrated into the clients’ everyday lives. Thus, in providing a space for the narrative and using the self-confrontation interview technique, counselors are able to help clients generate the link between their lives outside of counseling and their in-counseling encounters.

### ***Counseling's Third Task: Identifying Systems and Levels of Projects and Action***

We encourage counselors to identify how both, suicide and life facilitating actions, projects, and careers are organized in clients' lives, including the relevant other people who participate in their lives (Valach et al. 2006b). In addition, clients' other goal-directed systems should be identified, including work and life relationships (Richardson 1993), vocational life and peers relationships (Young et al. 1999), mothering and mattering (Schultheiss, 2009), health (Young et al. 2000, 2001), cultural processes (Young et al. 2003), among others. Counselors are encouraged to recognize that clients who are suicidal are engaged in both, health promoting and life facilitating actions, projects, and career (Valach and Badertscher 1996) and life-limiting and health-detrimental actions, projects, and careers, such as drug abuse (Graham et al. 2008; Valach and Badertscher 1996) and suicide. In counseling for suicidality, the counselor is aware that not only should life endangering action systems—suicide action, project and career—diminish, but also life facilitating action systems should be supported.

### ***Counseling's Fourth Task: Dealing with Emotion and Emotional Memory***

Emotions are central to the counseling process. They also have to be allowed to occur and be actively used in the counseling (Pascual-Leone and Greenberg 2007). Contextual action theory recognizes the relevance of emotion within goal-directed processes (Young et al. 1997). As Averill (1980) indicated, emotion is neither the sugar coating nor the bitter almond on the cake. Emotion is the fabric of action.

Although the division between rational or cognitive and emotional processes as separate events has been rejected (Phelps 2006), some memory events anchored in traumatizing experiences of clients who are suicidal can be seen more specifically as emotional processes. The person's quick holistic monitoring of events, which has been attributed to emotional processes, can be deterred by emotional memory. These emotional memories may not be identified as such by the client who is suicidal. Thus, an everyday situation can become frightening, with the consequence that the suicidal client disengages from the ongoing processes or copes with his or her fear in another, perhaps even detrimental, way. Clients often present these situations or complaints as difficulties or insecurities. Emotional memory is readily addressed in contextual action theory by analyzing and dealing with the processes within actions and projects as well as looking at the issue of long-term career in various areas of clients' lives. For example, a client's childhood experience of unsuccessful attempts to attract her mother's attention could have impacted her ability to process joint goal-directed actions with adequate emotions for many years to such a degree that the client became suicidal.

Two interventions contribute to directing emotions toward life enhancement and life facilitating in clients who are suicidal. The first is to ensure that the clients develop competency in emotional processing, that is, that he or she is able to differentiate their emotions, as well as the emotions of others. The second task is to identify and work on negative emotional memories that impact everyday situations and action monitoring. When clients are reminded of traumatizing situation experienced earlier in their lives, the emotion from the traumatizing experience occurs as the emotion of the action in “here and now.” Exposure and trauma therapy provide some means of treatment (Foa and Kozak 1986).

Related to the issue of emotional memory impacting certain relevant actions within projects and careers is the problem of linking various careers in different areas of life. This linking and intertwining are reflected in both facilitative and successful as well as the destructive and unsuccessful engagements of clients in life projects and careers. Although these processes are all goal-directed and follow the rules of top-down steering, the links between these processes can also occur as bottom-up steering often understood as impulsive or affective response as described above. The links from suicide processes to life-facilitative processes must be developed in a suicide preventive way following the conceptualization of the links between life-facilitating and suicidal processes. Some of the links facilitating a life enhancing action can be utilized in a precontemplated way as top-down steering, other depend on the bottom-up steering, when the desired action or sub-action is generated in an indirect way.

### ***Counseling’s Fifth Task: Dealing with Suboptimal and Detrimental Actions, Projects, and Career***

Counselors are encouraged to address suboptimal and detrimental processes in clients who are suicidal by jointly searching for optimal goals, strategies and regulation processes in the ongoing relevant projects. They need to use procedural rather than reflective thinking to do so. Procedural thinking is closer to human experience and everyday thinking than reflective thinking is. Counselors should seek to construct their encounters with these clients in a way in which action processes are generated, enfolded, and experienced and not just talked about.

### **Outcomes of the Counseling Process**

The goal of counseling informed by contextual action theory is not simply to reduce clients’ suicidality. Rather, it is mainly intended to support the client in building a strong life-enhancing and life-sustaining system of goal-directed processes in different life areas. This aim involves an elaborate view of the domains and issues of the life-enhancing career. It also involves a clear understanding of how counseling can be evaluated as reaching these goals (see Young and Valach 2008, and Chap. 19

in this volume). Rather than intervention-control group designs or administrative performance evaluation, we suggest counseling can be called successful when more of the following questions are answered in a strongly positive manner: Is the client engaged in meaningful goal-directed action? Is the client involved in a motivated way in projects generated by him or herself or by others, but agreed upon by the client? Is the client following a life-enhancing career?

In regard to actions, counselors should ask themselves the following questions: Is the client engaged in shared action goals that are relevant for life-enhancing projects and career? Are the client's cognitive-emotional processes salient and do they serve the identity goals of the client?

In regard to project, counselors should ask themselves the following questions: Is the client engaged in a joint goal-directed project relevant for a life-enhancing career in a way that serves his/her identity goals, in an emotional sensitive manner, and in a cooperative way? Are these mid-term goals challenging but not too stressful? Is the client performing successful project steps and receiving positive feedback in cooperative undertakings? Are these projects emotionally satisfying and functional?

In regard to life-enhancing career, counselors should ask themselves: Is the client involved in a life-enhancing and life sustaining career that provides a meaningful life in a socially integrated and emotionally satisfying way? Do these long-term engagements allow for novelty and also allow enough security and predictability? Does the client attend to long-term emotional life issues?

In addition to these questions the structurally defined aspects of actions, projects and career should also be monitored and evaluated. Here the questions address the adequate execution of the actions, projects and career as well as the presence of personal, social and material resources.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have suggested that, in order to develop successful encounters with clients who are suicidal, we can advantageously use the understanding of suicide behavior as goal-directed action, rather than, for example, suicide as a response driven by a mental disorder. Systems of goal-directed processes in form of short-term actions, mid-term projects, and long-term career offer a differentiated network for classifying of various processes involved in suicide. First, we illustrated the hierarchical nature of these processes and stressed the importance of seeing suicide in relational terms, suggesting that suicide is a social process. Secondly, we pointed out that people who are suicidal contact many lay people before and particularly after their incomplete suicide action. Thus, lay people become an important target for suicide prevention. Thirdly, we further indicated that many people who are suicidal describe social events from their childhood as an important part of their suicidal career. These events are part of their emotional memories, which are often operational in their suicide action. Fourthly, in outlining that goal-directed processes of

suicide are subject to both top-down and bottom-up steering, we indicated that early emotional experience is accommodated in these two types of steering processes in different ways. Finally, in the context of counseling clients who are suicidal, we described the five counseling tasks and discussed the conceptualization of the client-counselor encounter in term of goal-directed processes. By addressing the issue of life-enhancing goal-directed processes, we stressed the positive psychology orientation of contextual action theory informed suicide counseling.

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**Part IV**  
**Action and Counseling Practice**

# Chapter 19

## Counseling Processes and Procedures

Richard A. Young, Ladislav Valach and José F. Domene

The authors of the previous chapters have extensively examined the place of action in counseling. In particular chapters they have shown its connections, both in similarities and differences, with major counseling trends and positions. Others have applied action to particular counseling populations and presenting problems. In Chaps. 9 and 10, we provided an overview of counseling and action from the perspective of contextual action theory (CAT) and, in applying this perspective, identified and discussed five counseling tasks. In this chapter, we provide more details on counseling processes and procedures based on CAT. They are not intended to replace similar or competing processes and procedures that counselors may be using. Rather, in this chapter we invite counselors to examine more closely what they and their clients are doing from the perspective of goal-directed action.

Our invitation in this chapter, and in the book generally, is to join us in reflecting on the possibilities for professional practice and everyday life by respecting the constructive power of our clients and our encounters with them in life facilitating ways. It is an invitation to consider how relevant an everyday understanding of clients' lives and counsellors' practice is for professional practice and theorizing. As readers of this book, you know that its focus has not been limited to practical applications. You know that we, as editors and authors, have invited you to consider the broad conceptual dimensions of action in counseling as well as their implications for practice. It is our view that the basic philosophy and the methods and techniques go hand-in-hand, that they are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, the pre-condition of engaging in CAT-informed counseling is to be acquainted not only with the action project methods and techniques (Valach and Young 2013; Young et al. 2011a, 2011b), but also with the basic philosophy and approach of CAT. This approach as

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applied to counseling implies that we see clients' and counselors' relevant processes and joint client–counselor processes in this framework.

With this in mind, in this final chapter we begin by identifying the links between counseling informed by CAT and other major theoretical approaches to counseling. Without losing our grounding in only one theoretical perspective, we then proceed to detail the counselor's specific challenges of connecting with the client's daily life, which illustrate the integrative application of CAT-informed counseling. Additionally, some basic processes and procedures of counseling informed by CAT and two case illustrations supplement earlier discussions of counseling in this book.

## **Contextual Action Theory Informed Counseling and Other Counseling Approaches**

Throughout this book, we have argued that CAT is not a distinct, stand-alone counseling or therapeutic approach to be added to the proliferating pile of methods that have emerged in recent years. Counseling informed by CAT is integrative. Many procedures suggested by CAT are well known in other approaches. For example, it uses many aspects of cognitive behavioral therapy (see, for example, Valach and Young 2013). When behavior is understood as having cognitive and emotional components, it is an action. Emotion-focused therapy (Greenberg and Watson 2005; Watson, Chap. 8) overlaps to a great extent with some of the procedures of counseling informed by CAT. The latter also adheres to many principles of dialectic behavior therapy (Linehan 1993), as, on the one hand, dialectics is a basic principle of a relational orientation and, on the other, CAT also frames processes as oscillating between internally and externally directed constructions. Counseling informed by CAT is also related to experiential approaches (e.g., Ecker et al. 2012; Greenberg et al. 1998), as action and the experience of action – some authors would say *enaction* (Stewart et al. 2010) – is the center of the counseling process. Existential therapy (Frankl 2006; Yalom 1980) finds many comparable ideas in CAT as meaning (of life), goals, and projects provide cornerstones of CAT conceptualization. Psychodynamic therapies with their emphasis on interpersonal aspects and unconscious processes as well as their ability to construe a long-term working alliance are also well represented in counseling informed by CAT. Constructivist (Neimeyer and Mahoney 1999) and constructionist approaches (Burr 2003; Young and Collin 2004) are mirrored in CAT-informed counseling as social construction through action is its basic premise. Equally, many other counseling processes are used in CAT counseling, including problem-solving (Leith 2007; Malouff et al. 2007), narrative psychotherapy (Angus and McLeod 2004), positive psychology (Snyder and Lopez 2002), post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004), phenomenological approaches (Halling and Dearborn Nill 1995; Laing 1995), mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn et al. 2002), career construction counseling (Savickas 2011), and project work (Little et al. 2007). This list could be much longer as CAT is not an approach defined by its sharp borders but by its integrative stance.

Counseling theories allow the counselor to conceptualize their cases and, based on that conceptualization, to act jointly with the client relative to the case. The theories answer the question of how counselors think about their clients and the issues they present. Logically, case conceptualization may precede the processes and procedures, but in effect, conceptualization and the implementation of counseling processes and procedures occur simultaneously with the counselor's engagement with the client. Although the theories the counselor has learned, accepted, and integrated are an important part of that process, the counselor knows that it is unlikely that the client is guided by a similar formal counseling theory. Rather, clients bring everyday understandings of themselves, their lives, and their problems to counseling. In addition, no matter how sophisticated the counselors' conceptual frameworks may be, they still rely on an everyday understanding of clients' lives and problems. Counselors rely on this understanding because it is the clients' frameworks in which they are acting out their lives. Moreover, the counseling processes and procedures are actions and, like all the actions discussed in this book, are subject to everyday understandings. The main difference from the aforementioned approaches is that CAT-informed counseling relies on the basic principles of CAT, including the important principles of systemic order, multiple perspectives, process orientation, relationalism, contextualism, and constructionism.

Shortly, we provide and elaborate on a list of processes and procedures that detail how the different levels and systems of actions can be addressed in counseling for optimal client outcome and functioning. Before examining the list in detail, it may be helpful to immerse oneself in a case example of how action theory can provide a way of conceptualizing a case (see Text Box 19.1) and a second example of how CAT is used to describe the counseling process as implemented in one counseling session (see Text Box 19.2). Some readers may prefer to refer to these cases as they read the details of the levels and systems of action as applied to optimal client functioning.

### **Text Box 19.1 The Case of Veronique: A Case Conceptualization**

In this chapter we described the aspects of action, project, and career that can be addressed in counseling to assist clients to engage in meaningful joint projects and life-enhancing careers. Coupled with the five counseling tasks envisioned in counseling informed by contextual action theory (see Chap. 9 and Valach and Young 2012), a rich, integrative conceptual framework and practice guidelines emerge. This framework and these guidelines are briefly illustrated in the following case example of how a client's situation and presenting problems may be conceptualized by a CAT-informed practitioner.

Veronique, a 37-year-old woman, sought therapy and counseling because she became very anxious after being involved in a traffic accident. She reported a number of actions she could no longer perform, for example, driving her car. She also reported on actions she could engage in only with great difficulty because of anxiety; for example, relaxing when her 16-year-old daughter is out. In addition, her relationship with her daughter (project) suffered.

Veronique indicated that she would like to “get on with my life,” that is, continue with her other projects and long-term involvements, but could not leave the accident behind. She also complained about her partner, the father of her daughter, who had been living with them for the last year, after a nine-year absence. She reported that he does not help at home, and is impulsive, self-righteous, and violent. He also does not contribute much to the running of the household. Veronique spoke in a very distant manner about the accident in which she suffered internal injuries after being run over by a car. Reflecting upon her past, she talked about her unreliable alcoholic mother under whom she suffered much. Veronique had returned to her previous employment as a clerk in a shop after the injury. However, she expressed dissatisfaction with this job and her lack of qualifications to get the better job she desired. Furthermore, she expressed her intention to leave her partner after their daughter reached her 18th birthday. Thus, the counselor recognizes a number of long-term involvements and strivings we label “career,” including her relationship to her partner, to her daughter, to her mother, and her employment career. Her projects include getting over the accident, progressing at work, terminating her relationship with her partner, improving her relationship with her daughter and, above all, overcoming her present anxieties.

Veronique wants to improve some actions, such as being able to drive her car again. Some of the strivings and goal-directed processes can be addressed at goal level, such as her career project. Others would have to be unpacked at the level of action and project steps; that is, the control system where the functionality in regards to the action and project goals is examined and changed. Some others have to be addressed and worked on as action regulation, for example, her anxiety provoking contexts and cues.

Veronique was inhibited in her actions and projects by a number of emotional memories. These included the trauma of the accident, then an emotional memory of an earlier car accident in which she was not injured. There was also the memory of a number of emotional events and actions with her abusive mother, her violent partner, and others. Additionally, during the fearful experiences with her mother, she developed a tendency to dissociate, a habit she needs to unlearn.

Veronique’s suboptimal and detrimental actions and projects are related to her traumatization, but also to her belief, enacted in her relationship project with her partner, that she must remain in an abusive relationship as she had experienced with her mother.

In the joint elaborating of Veronique’s action systems, of her emotional memories and her detrimental actions and projects, a helping alliance can be constructed. However, Veronique has to learn about her dissociative strategies that make it difficult for her to engage in the work on her traumatic experiences and emotional memory, which are the topic of her dissociation.

**Text Box 19.2 Counseling Process: A Session with Sandra and Anne**

Sandra, a 19-year-old woman, was seen on four occasions by a counselor, Anne, who works from a systems perspective. Sandra's initial presenting problem, elaborated in the first session, was the challenge of returning home after having lived in another city for a year. Specifically, she was concerned about her relationship with her parents and her possible reimmersion in the local drug culture. The third session is discussed here from a contextual action theory perspective based on a detailed analysis of all the sessions from that perspective.

Sandra's presenting problem and subsequent engagement with Anne revealed two interrelated projects that were of concern to her, namely, identity and relationship.

In Session 3, Sandra's goals were to gain support and validation for both the adult she was becoming and her position within her family. The latter goal seemed particular salient in light of her parents' lack of acknowledgement of her progress toward responsible adulthood. She perceived that her parents were treating her "like a child," "like I'm still 15." The relational project is intertwined with her identity project and goal that is apparent throughout this session. She wanted to be able to define herself in opposition to both her brother and her mother, and paradoxically, in likeness to her mother in some respects. Part of the session is given over to trying to resolve her indecision about staying in this city or moving to another city.

Sandra used a number of functional steps in this session to reach her goals. She openly shared details about herself and her family. She explained in detail the challenges of her family situation—not being recognized as an adult, being caught in the middle, being considered as one who needs to be controlled, being lashed out against. She repeatedly expressed frustration, anger, disbelief, and exasperation about her situation.

In engaging with Sandra in this session, Anne, the counselor, had the following goals. She wanted to align herself with the client and to continue to build the working alliance begun in the first session. She addressed Sandra's sense of identity with her. Anne's goals included trying to understand the family context and to make suggestions so Sandra would experience less conflict at home. She wanted to encourage the client to understand her parents' goals so that she could base her actions on them and not on her feeling of being devalued. In this way, Anne hoped that Sandra would be able to lessen her conflict with her parents.

Anne took a number of functional steps to reach her goals. Anne expressed interest in tracking Sandra's narrative. She normalized and validated Sandra's experience. She encouraged Sandra to see her parents' perspective and to see herself in relation to others. She explored with Sandra her family context,

using a family systems lens. She advised about effective communication techniques to use with her family. At the same time Anne was challenged in trying to help the client develop some awareness of her own internal processes as she engaged in actions with others.

Sandra's and Anne's individual goals and functional steps came together to form joint goals for the session. Addressing the client's identity was one of them, represented in the issues of Sandra holding down two jobs and finishing high school. Addressing the relational project was engaged in through a dynamic process of the client requesting support by complaining and the counselor providing support by validating, praising, approving, and complementing the client. Their joint counseling project is seen as satisfactory by both participants, yet the tension between them of client complaints and counselor praise continued from previous sessions.

## Connecting with the Client's Daily Life

In Chap. 9 and elsewhere (Valach and Young 2013), we have described the five counseling tasks inspired by CAT. Here we adopt a complementary way of expanding and detailing that information. Specifically, the counseling task of connecting with the client's daily life and with the actions and projects in the client's daily life, involves addressing where to go with the client's actions and projects. Of course, this direction is at the client's discretion, and, although CAT is not normatively prescriptive, it provides suggestions of what should be attended to. Elsewhere we proposed a list illustrating optimal functioning in the range of systems and levels of goal-directed action (Young and Valach 2008). It is summarized in Table 19.1. This list of "optimal" functions is neither definitive nor exhaustive, but it offers a framework for further considerations. Table 19.1 provides examples of the issues for the counselor and client to address in counseling. The best chances for successful counseling is greatly increased when these issues are well processed and integrated, while considering culture, environment, and resources.

The following simplified schema distinguishes between action, project and career systems. It further distinguishes between three levels of each system. At the highest level, action, project, and career can all be considered from the perspective of goals. These goals reflect their steering processes. Goals are constructed, identified, and spoken about in socially meaningful categories. The second level of Table 19.1 represents the steps in implementing an action, project, and career. These steps have a control function and are represented by their functional description. The third level represents the elements of action, project, and career. This level captures regulation processes and is defined in physical terms. The numbering in the following text corresponds to the numbers used in Table 19.1.

**Table 19.1** Domains and issues of the life-enhancing career. (Source: Young and Valach 2008; used with permission)

	Meaningful goal-directed actions	Motivated participation in projects generated by actor and/or others	Life-enhancing career
<i>At the level of meaning, goals (steering processes)</i>	1 Shared action goals	3 Joint, goal-directed projects	7 Long-term meaning in life
	2 Relevant to projects and career	4 Cooperative	8 Socially integrated
		5 Emotionally sensitive	9 Emotionally satisfying
		6 Relevant to career and identity	
		12 Mid-term challenging	16 Long-term challenging
		13 Successful steps	17 Allowing predictability and novelty
<i>At the level of control processes</i>	10 Serving identity and goal processes	14 Positive feedback in cooperative undertakings	18 Attendance to emotional issues
	11 Emotional and cognitive components	15 Emotionally functional	
		23 Adequate structural support	26 Long-term adequate time and sequence
		24 Predictable and manageable time order	27 Structural properties
<i>At the level of action elements (unconscious and conscious behavior, structural support, resources) and regulation processes</i>	19 Energy	25 Adequate emotional resources	28 Resources
	20 Cognitive and emotional regulation		29 Functional emotional regulation
	21 Skills		
	22 Habits		

## The Goal Level/Steering Processes of Action

### (1) Shared Action Goals

To what extent are counselors aware of their clients' individual and joint action goals and of the possible strengths and weaknesses of these actions? With their clients, counselors can address and work on supporting resourceful actions and improving or abandoning detrimental ones. In order to understand and work with a client's shared action goals, counselors can ask themselves questions such as the following: What are the client's actions and goals when relating to others? What are the actions the client is dissatisfied with? What are the actions the client is proud of? What are the client's destructive action goals? What are the client's constructive and life enhancing actions and goals and how can they be improved? What were my own and the client's joint actions and goals in the session?



## ***(2) Actions Relevant to Projects and Career***

To what extent are counselors aware of how client actions are connected to, and relevant for, important projects and careers in their lives? Here counselors can ask themselves: How does the client integrate these actions in projects and careers for the medium and long term? It is expected that actions can be consciously and meaningfully integrated into projects, which, in turn, can be part of a conscious, constructive, and desired career. However, clients often do not consciously make such a link, that is, they do not make a connection between their actions and their projects. Or they make a link without reflecting on it. The bottom-up steering process of experiencing a flashback is one such example (Valach et al. 2006). Peter is a 45-year-old construction worker who 25 years earlier, had experienced his father suffering from a brain injury incurred in an accident, which later resulted in his father's death. In the present, a lethal injury to his supervisor, with whom he was very close, resulted in Peter being unable to work at the workshop where the accident happened, even though he wanted to. The moment Peter sees the work yard, his goal of going to work is abandoned and changed to an avoidance goal, even though a few minutes earlier Peter was determined to take up his work. Thus, the flashback not only impacts Peter's emotional and physiological processes, but it also builds up an action in a bottom-up manner (see also Chap. 18).

Clients can also be mistaken in connecting actions and projects. For example, a client could connect her action of engaging in numerous arguments with others, from which she reports feeling upset and disappointed with herself, to her project of "addressing injustice." However, she might subsequently learn that the feelings motivating her aggressive engagements with others are based on her emotional memories that let her fight against past injustices she suffered, and thus is actually a part of a "revenge" project. Career counselors are also challenged to help their clients link actions and projects to relevant careers, and to identify with their clients the appropriate careers for their projects and actions.

## **The Goal Level/Steering Processes of Project and Career**

### ***(3) Joint, Goal-Directed Projects***

To what extent are counselors aware of clients' individual and joint projects and of the possible strength and weaknesses of these projects? Counselors can address the issue of, and instigate the work on, supporting resourceful projects and improving or abandoning detrimental ones. At this level, counselors can note clients' most important projects, including which projects are life facilitative or destructive, the projects clients handle well and those for which support is required. Usually, clients engage in and present a number of projects in counseling. Identity and relationship projects are often the most critical ones (see examples in Marshall et al. 2008;

Young et al. 2006; 2008). Ongoing relationships to partners, children, parents, work and other colleagues, neighbors, and friends can often be valuable resources but also a source of problems. Occupational projects are equally important in modern and postmodern societies and often of concern in counseling (Domene et al. 2012; Young et al. 2008). Frequently, these projects involve one or more sub-projects that have the client's attention, such as fitness, body weight, eating habits, sleeping, managing household chores, or passing exams.

#### ***(4) Motivated Projects Are Consensual or Cooperative***

To what extent does the counselor address the issue of whether and how the client is engaged in cooperative projects? Cooperative projects stress the consensual aspects of any engagement in a joint venture. It is important for clients to understand and experience how their joint projects are mutual, even if there is disagreement or conflict in the engagement. It is particularly helpful in counseling when the counselor and client can attend to the client's cooperative projects with other people in the client's life. What are these projects? What is their quality? How is the client involved? What function or role does the client have in the project? Is the client part of goal setting? Do the client and other people in the client's life share the project goals? How does the client contribute to the project? Are these projects helpful to the client's personally relevant career?

#### ***(5) Emotionally Sensitive***

To what extent do counselors assess whether clients' projects are emotionally sensitive in a life-facilitating or life-detrimental way and consider appropriate interventions? What is the emotional dimension of these projects? Are the projects conceived with the appropriate emotional understanding, are they emotionally well monitored, and are they energized or de-energized?

#### ***(6) Relevant to Career and Identity***

A number of questions arise for counselors when assessing the relevance of client projects for their career and identity processes. Do clients link their projects with something more long-term? How do clients make this link? To what extent are clients conscious of their references to the link between project and career? How are projects integrated with and help the client's identity processes? To what extent are projects facilitative, inhibitive or even detrimental to career and identity?

### ***(7) Long-Term Meaning of Life***

The long-term meaning of life addresses clients' enduring goal-directed processes. Long-term meaning is more than a philosophical or ethical question. Rather, this issue is often critical to resolving the presenting problem, such as in suicidal, depressive, and self-harming clients. Only by being aware of this issue can counselors begin to address it appropriately. For example, in certain circumstances, it may be suitable for the counselor and client to launch a process of change in the client's meaning of life and his or her philosophy and values, using, for example, an existential approach. Of course, counselors, like all people, have to attend to these issues in their own lives and practices. Thus, long-term life meaning provides a particularly rich domain for authentic counselor–client collaboration.

### ***(8) Socially Integrated***

Socially integrated projects can contribute to the person's sense of belongingness to a given society. They are projects through which the person is accepted and recognized within the social, cultural, political, and socio-economic group, for example, participating in work, rearing children, developing relationships, participating in community work, or contributing to neighborhood development. How clients' long-term careers are integrated in a given society is an important question. Although it cannot be answered in a prescriptive way, counselors and clients should address it in counseling to ensure that clients are attending to it satisfactorily. Joint and collaborative actions and projects and relationships are important parts of clients' social lives. Clients' goal-directed processes, particularly long-term dealings, must possess a reasonable degree of social integration otherwise they may become a source of problems and difficulties.

### ***(9) Emotionally Satisfying***

Although our emotional participation and engagement in life is wide-ranging, long-term involvements can be a particularly rich source of emotional gratification and positive expectation. To attend to long-term emotional satisfaction with clients, counselors can ask themselves whether and to what extent clients' long-term processes are emotionally satisfying. If possible, this question should be answered positively before counseling is terminated.

## **The Level of Functional Processes and Control of Action**

### ***(10) Serving Identity and Goal Processes***

The action steps clients take should facilitate their action goals. They should also serve actions related to client identity. In CAT-informed counseling, actions are short-term goal-directed processes containing action steps as a system of functionally defined units directed at achieving the goal. Thus, counselors can analyze how clients proceed in pursuing goals. The analysis is based on the client's actions during the counseling sessions, and on reported actions that take place outside of counseling. For example the action of a mother who describes trying to provide feedback to her adolescent son by using the reproachful question, "why don't you ever do as I tell you?" is easily recognized as an action step dysfunctional to her goal of trying to instill a greater sense of responsibility in her son.

### ***(11) Emotional and Cognitive Components***

Counselors do much more than address their clients' observable manifest behaviors. Addressing the emotional and cognitive processes in action is part of counselors' required competence. There is substantial information on optimal emotional and cognitive processing in the counseling and psychotherapy literature for counselors to use. Thus, the question counselors can ask themselves is: to what extent are they aware of the cognitive-emotional processes in their clients' actions? The last phrase in the question, *in their clients' actions*, is important because it suggests that emotions and cognitions have to be addressed as they are embodied in action. Emotions and cognitions are much more than representational states or philosophies; rather they are embodiments. In addition, in answering the question, counselors should not limit themselves to focusing on emotions that disrupt action. Cognitive strategies, such as mindfulness, accepting, problem-solving, and coping are also helpful in counseling.

## **The Level of Functional Processes and Control of Project**

### ***(12) Mid-Term Challenging***

Short-term harmony and adaptation are not the primary aims of CAT-informed counseling. Instead, the temporal focus of the approach is in the mid-term; that is, its focus is on how actions are constructed as projects over various periods of time. Furthermore, the steps of a client's project should be challenging but not overpowering. The steps should be neither too exciting nor too boring, neither beyond the client's means nor too easy to complete.

### ***(13) Successful Steps***

Are the client's projects devised in such a way that it is possible and practical to engage in successful project steps? What are the successful steps required in order to maintain these projects? Projects themselves should generate successful project steps to serve the project goals. Thus, counselors can help clients in developing the necessary project steps with the appropriate control processes.

### ***(14) Positive Feedback in Cooperative Undertakings***

The important mechanism for control processes is feedback. For example, to what extent and how do parents mutually provide and receive feedback about their joint parenting project? Counselors might ask themselves: How is the processing of feedback functioning in joint projects? Are clients competent in providing and receiving constructive feedback to maintain their joint projects? Constructive feedback is particularly important in joint, collaborative, and cooperative projects. This seemingly trivial understanding often helps in many relationships.

### ***(15) Emotionally Functional***

The steps of a project should allow the client to process emotion in a functional way. The steps of a project should be emotionally anchored in the client, monitored by the client, and resonate with the client. Emotionally functional project steps are rooted in the "here and now" without becoming detrimental to the mid-term construction of the project. Clients can be supported in the range of skills needed to ensure that their project steps are emotionally functional. For example, cognitive-emotional competence is concerned not only with processes within an action but also with the mid-term processes of projects. Caring for emotional presence and including emotionally enhancing project steps can be learned in the counseling sessions.

## **The Level of Functional Processes and Control of Career**

### ***(16) Long-Term Challenging***

Counselors can help clients to generate long-term career processes. These processes should be personally and socially meaningful, and challenging, but not surpassing clients' resources and learning possibilities. Learning that long-term aims are a source of motivation rather than disillusion is an important process through which counselors can facilitate and support their clients.

### ***(17) Allowing for Predictability and Novelty***

In the long-term, it is likely that clients want to maintain a balance between their thirst for novelty and their need for predictability. The relative proportions of this mixture differ from person to person, and from career to career. Marriage is an oft-cited example of a career in which an imbalance between predictability and novelty can become a problem. This issue of finding an appropriate balance should be addressed explicitly in counseling and clients should be supported in trying to construct careers that allow for a functional balance between predictability and novelty.

### ***(18) Attendance to Emotional Issues***

To what extent are the steps in the long-term career sufficiently anchored in emotion and monitored over time? Processes involved in constructing long-term careers require vibrant emotional involvement, despite their social and institutional anchoring. For example, the dissolution of many marriages is frequently attributed to a lack of emotional involvement in the processes that sustain them. Attending to the emotional issues involved in short-term action or mid-term projects can be challenging for clients. However, these processes can be examined in counseling as the basis for dealing with the more challenging task of addressing emotional issues in long-term career.

## **The Level of the Elements of Action**

### ***(19) Energy***

The client's energy level is an issue that counselors should be aware of and address. Counselors can easily monitor clients in the counseling session or through the clients' reports. Clients frequently complain of experiencing a lack of energy. Furthermore, a lack of energy is a symptom of numerous psychological disorders, such as depression. Many symptoms, such those associated with emotional trauma, are characterized by a lack of energy. Energy, although mainly manifest at the level of action elements, can be addressed at all levels of the action. For example, clients are not likely to be energized by either meaningless goals or futile sequences of action steps. Where emotional regulation is "switched off," no energy is provided.

### ***(20) Cognitive and Emotional Regulation***

To what extent are the client's regulatory processes "operational"? Are the regulatory processes directed toward ongoing action or are they serving other purposes, such as addressing challenges from emotional memory? Cognitive and emotional

regulation is not a mechanism that operates by itself. It is a contextual process integrated in an action. Thus, when counselors address clients' cognitive and emotional regulation, they must do so in the context of the related action. Counseling provides a good venue in which to practice cognitive and emotional regulation in relation to particular client actions. In addition, longer-term practice oriented interventions such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) groups have also been shown to be effective in enhancing cognitive and emotional regulation (Segal et al. 2002).

### ***(21) Skills***

To what extent are the necessary verbal and non-verbal skills to perform actions well ingrained and readily or automatically available to the client? Skills include those needed at the goal level as actions and at the level of action steps as strategies and plans. For example, planning has long been recognized as a skill that clients require. Skills also refer to those micro processes we execute semi-automatically, for example, the counselor's physical openness to the client. Skills training is a very common procedure in many counseling and therapy approaches and should not be overlooked by CAT-informed counselors.

### ***(22) Habits***

To what extent are the client's beneficial as well as detrimental behaviors habitualized? For example, getting very little sleep on a regular basis may be a habit a person developed while a student. It may have been beneficial for a short period of time for the student's academic achievement, but when habitualized may be detrimental to the person's health. As noted, habits can be life enhancing or life detrimental. They can also facilitate action or inhibit it. Counselors can assist clients to identify and change habitualized actions, for example, chronic nail-biting, and habitualized elements of action, for example, talking too much in anxiety-provoking social situations. Habit reversal training is one intervention successfully used to change habits (Azrin and Nunn 1973; Piacentini and Chang 2006).

## **The Level of the Elements of Project**

### ***(23) Adequate Structural Support***

To what extent can clients provide or obtain adequate support for their projects, including material, personal, and social resources? Clearly some actions and projects are structured and thus entail structurally supportive as well as inhibitive features. For example, the availability of special education teachers is a resource needed for

many educational projects for developmentally delayed children. Similarly, social capital, a resource identified by sociologists (Coleman 1990), contributes to the productive benefits of a variety of projects, including one's health project (Lin 2001). Counselors sometimes bypass the issue of adequate structural support for their clients' projects because it does not appear "internal" to the client's psychological functioning. However, helping the client obtain adequate quantity and quality supportive processes and structures can frequently make the difference in implementing a project. Thus, attending to and helping the client to obtain adequate structural support is typically an important component of CAT-informed counseling.

### ***(24) Predictable and Manageable Time Order***

Do the projects that clients are engaged in have a manageable and predictable time order? Is this an issue clients need to become more aware of? Time order is also monitored and attended to at this level of action and project organization. For example, the single mother who has two jobs may not have as predictable and manageable time order to engage in the parenting project she and her children would like. Counselors help their clients develop an adequate time order in which the required tasks can be addressed.

### ***(25) Adequate Emotional Resources***

To what extent do clients' projects receive adequate emotional support and do they have access to the necessary emotional resources? These emotional resources are part of how a project is regulated. For example, having a sufficient number of rewarding interpersonal relationships that can be drawn on may assist a young person in his transition project from living at home to living on his own. These are different than attending to emotional issues as a part of control processes of a career described above (18). As an example of the latter, one would expect that incorporating regular holidays as part of a professional career could be identified as a functionally defined step that allows the person to attend to the emotional issues in her life.

## **The Level of the Elements of Career**

### ***(26) Long-Term Adequate Time and Sequence***

To what extent do clients' careers and other long-term processes possess an adequate time order? To what extent are the career aspects well organized sequentially? For example, aspiring to, developing, and engaging in professional occupations require a long-term time perspective and sequence. Counselors and clients are encouraged



to address the latter's long-term striving to ensure that these are well developed as far as time structure is concerned and, thus, will generate goals that are realistic prospects rather than dreams.

### ***(27) Structural Properties***

To what extent are the structural properties of the client's career adequate? It is very understandable that long-term meaning cannot be realized without substantial structural support. Consider the ways in which long-term careers such as education, marriage, and parenting are structured in our society through institutions, laws, and long-standing customs. Although counseling may not be the best place to address the structural details of a career fully, some attention could be paid to generating the necessary strategies to obtain some appropriate structural requirements or at least raising clients' awareness of the connection between the client's desired career and the structures in their lives.

### ***(28) Resources***

To what extent are the resources needed for the client's career adequate and sustainable? Resources refer to a range of personal and interpersonal resources both psychological and material. As with structural properties, not all resources for a career can be discussed and mobilized during the counseling. However, clients can learn to pay adequate attention to these issues in a constructive manner.

### ***(29) Functional Emotional Regulation***

To what extent are the client's long-term emotional regulatory processes well organized and career facilitating? In contrast to dealing with time order, structural properties, and resources, the issue of emotional regulation within a career is an important activity, which should be explicitly addressed in counseling. A wise distribution of emotionally relevant projects and actions within a career is an important concern to counselors and clients. For example, Kidd (2004) has extensively reviewed the role of emotion in career and work. The consequences of ignoring emotion and emotional regulation within a career are often the focus of counseling.

In summary, this incomplete list of the features counselors and clients should attend to and realize in counseling indicates that a systemic order can be used for monitoring, addressing, negotiating, and formulating certain counseling aims. Not only does the list suggest that counselors have to make their prescriptive ideas conscious and negotiable, but it also implies that counselors need to know how to implement them. Relying on the proposed systemic order can help counselors

avoid formulating judgmental propositions. It offers a constructive solution to the dilemma of the counselors' class and culture dictating the goals of the counseling, on the one hand, and leaving goal construction solely to clients' formulations, on the other. Specifically, we know that the counselor's lifestyle might not be suitable and attractive to everyone. We also know that the goals clients formulate relative to their presenting problems are often overshadowed by the same problems when addressing other aspects of their lives. For example, the helplessness of a depressed client may be evident in both the presenting problems, the counseling process, and the client's other projects and career. The CAT-informed list of features provides a way to integrate both the counselor's and the client's perspectives in formulating and pursuing goals for their work together.

## **The Processes of Joining the Client and Supporting Projects**

Counseling informed by CAT is characterized by the counselor joining the client. It is not characterized by maintaining a professional distance between counselor and client, by stressing the counselor's expertise over that of the client, by the counselor's ultimate leadership in counseling, by the counselor transporting the client into a different world, or by the counselor isolating the client from his or her everyday world. "Joining the client," which is not always easily distinguishable from "facilitating the client," can be realized through the following procedures.

First, the counselor joins the client in session through the joint construction of narratives. During the session, clients implicitly select a dominant theme or project from the narrative action that is reflective of how emotionally engaged they are. The counselor joins the client's project not only through the content of the narratives but also through the action of narration. For example, strong emotion during the recollection of an episode indicates an important emotional project. Similarly, the way the client engages in interacting with the counselor indicates a social project of "engaging in relationships strategies." These strategies and the joint narrative have been described in the research and practice literature, which provides a rich reservoir of information on the first and subsequent sessions in counseling and therapy (e.g., Angus and McLeod 2004; Duck 1997; Michel and Valach 2011).

Secondly, the counselor joins the client through facilitating the client's engagement in some actions from a joint project with a relevant other, which is video recorded and followed with a self-confrontation interview. This procedure can also include additional sessions. A dominant project will be explicated through analysis of video recordings of the joint actions with a relevant other and of the self-confrontation interview.

Joining the client can be enhanced further by supporting the client's project over time, which, in turn, involves addressing the client's work on the project in the counseling session and monitoring this work between sessions. Between session work may take the form of checking on the client's on-going projects with the client

through e-mail or telephone, with additional facilitative information, exercises, or emotional and training homework. These steps are premised on the client's understanding of the need to work on the projects in which they are interested. The self-confrontation procedure can contribute to making the project explicit. The themes of the client's narratives allow the counselor and client to focus on the project.

## Conclusion

Subscribing to the philosophy, theory, and practice proposed in this book is not a matter of replacing one propositional system by another, or one set of interventions with another. It is more a matter of stepping aside from our habitual practice of conducting counseling "business as usual." It is a call to join us in reflecting on a number of issues, on gaining insight about the correspondence between methods and concepts, on the relevance of the everyday understanding in professional practice theory and research (i.e., naïve theory of action and social meaning in professional research and practice), and on the mechanistic roots of many procedures (i.e., the historical research design in counseling psychology is often predicated on causal models abandoned in modern sciences). It also is a call for respecting our clients' constructive power and of the client-counselor encounter in life-facilitating and life-detrimental ways. Consequently, this book has been less about being right or closer to the "truth" and more about realizing the implications and consequences of a number of considerations that have been shown to make sense.

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