

Advancing a cross-cultural narrative approach to career counselling: The case of Vietnam

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to advance the concept of narrative approaches to career counselling from a cross-cultural perspective by investigating the case of Vietnam. It offers an account of the sociocultural context of Vietnam as it shifts from its traditional Confucian and communist values to a modern globally integrated market economy. Current approaches to career counselling in Vietnam for students in secondary and tertiary education are outdated and so fail to respond to the challenges that this shift is creating. It is argued that narrative career counselling has the potential to reconcile the tension between the need for flexibility and self-direction in work and career in a society that continues to be heavily influenced by Confucian ethics and collective notions of the self. The paper concludes with a call for future research on the practice of narrative career counselling cross-culturally to test its suitability.

Keywords

Narrative career counselling, self-identity, cross-cultural, communism, Confucianism, globalisation, modernisation

The *Vietnam competitiveness report* (Ketels et al., 2010) and *Vietnam 2035: Toward prosperity, creativity, equity, and democracy* (World Bank, 2016) both concluded that Vietnam needs to develop more effective strategies to improve the skills of its workforce if it is to compete better in the global marketplace. One of the challenges that Vietnam faces is that students receive little career development in their formal education. To this end, the Vietnamese Government has identified career development at all educational levels as an important strategy for improving the work ready skills of its students (Arulmani, 2014; Do &

Nguyen, 2015; Le, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2017; MOET, 2008; Tran, 2018; World Bank, 2012, 2014). Recognition of the importance of career development in Vietnam can also be seen in the recent creation of the country's first career development peak body (Asia Pacific Career Development Association Vietnam, 2017), as well as increased research seeking to improve the quality and relevance of career development in secondary (e.g. Do & Nguyen, 2015), vocational (e.g. VVOB, 2017), and tertiary education (e.g. Le et al., 2017; Mate et al., 2017; Tran, 2012).

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Nevertheless, research on graduate employability and related topics indicates that commonly employed career counselling theories and practices are outdated and outmoded (Arulmani, 2014; Do & Nguyen, 2015; Le, Hagans, Powers, & Hass, 2011; Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tran, 2013; Vo, 2009). Part of the problem is that the theory and practice of career counselling in Vietnam fails to take into account the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that are currently influencing the world of work and careers in the country (Arulmani, 2014; Do & Nguyen, 2015). Another problem is that career counsellors in Vietnam are not trained to work with students from diverse backgrounds and learning styles (Le et al., 2011; Tran, 2013; Vo, 2009). As a consequence, many young people report finding it difficult to make career decisions and eventually they end up in careers for which they are unsuited, uninterested, and unmotivated (Do & Nguyen, 2015; Le et al., 2011; World Bank, 2012). Career counselling in Vietnam needs to better address these issues and challenges to provide its students with the skills required for the country's continued economic growth and development. It is argued that narrative career counselling be considered as an alternative, because it has the potential to effectively respond to these and other issues to be explored in more detail in this paper.

The following discussion outlines the context of work and careers in Vietnam, in particular the transition to a market economy, its influence on the formation of self-identity, and how narrative career counselling can help students respond to some of the issues this transition has created. The discussion throughout is designed to stimulate debate on the theory and practice of narrative career counselling in the context of Vietnam.

Social, cultural, economic, and political context of careers in Vietnam

One of the most striking aspects of Vietnam's recent political and economic history is the rapid pace of change that is taking place as it shifts from communism to capitalism. After the overthrow of the French colonialists in 1954, North Vietnam (and then South Vietnam in 1975) became a communist nation with a 'centralised planned economy'. Employment during this era was characterised by *biên chế* or *công chức*, where everyone of age was assigned a secure lifetime position by the government, which gave the worker little freedom of choice, but which also required little in the way of professional competence such as self-awareness, lifelong learning, and career planning (Nguyen, 2002).

In 1986, the government instituted *Đổi Mới* (translated as renovation) shifting to a decentralised 'socialist market economy'. The country's leaders pursued an open door policy exposing the economy to the forces of globalisation and free trade. While

Vietnam has enjoyed high year-on-year economic growth since, it has also suffered from the drawbacks associated with market-based neoliberal policies. For example, there have been radical changes in employment relations and workplace conditions, such as job insecurity, downsizing, delayering, increased casualisation, performance management, and short and/or fixed term contracts (e.g. Parry, Dickmann, Unite, Shen, & Briscoe, 2016). These changes have meant that choice of occupation and career must now be managed by the individual as opposed to the State, as it was during the communist era. The shift to a market economy has also seen the movement from a largely rural/agricultural economy and culture to one based on industry (manufacturing and energy) and the provision of services such as banking, finance, and leisure and tourism. There is now a much greater diversity of occupations available for students to consider; however, these require higher levels of education, specialisation, and professional capabilities, such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and self-directed career management (Grosse, 2015; Nguyen, McDonald, & Wearing, 2017; Tran, 2013; World Bank, 2016).

Despite these changes, Vietnam is still heavily influenced by traditional Confucian ethics¹, which value filial piety and obedience to in-group norms. Truong, Hallinger and Sanga (2017) note that in Vietnam: 'Confucian values remain widely evident, not only in the conduct of social relations, but also in the content of the education system' (p. 79), which has a number of implications for student's career development learning. For example, a teacher's knowledge is assumed to be indisputable and not open to challenge. Students are rarely given the opportunity to participate in open discussion and to share their ideas with their teachers and peers (Tran & Marginson, 2014). As a consequence, they are denied the opportunity to understand and articulate their values, attitudes, and beliefs (to develop self-awareness), which helps them to choose their future careers. This style of teaching has also been found to stifle independent self-directed learning (Stankov, 2010), which produces a passive approach in students who graduate lacking self-direction when it comes to managing their careers (Tran, 2012). Furthermore, the education system is not designed to meet the needs of students with differing learning styles. Teachers lack the training and resources in how to recognise, cater for, and promote the learning needs of those from diverse backgrounds (Tran, 2013).

The current education system fails to develop self-awareness and an understanding of the contemporary sociocultural context, resulting in graduates who struggle to be flexible, self-directed, and able to adapt to the uncertain, demanding, and constantly changing nature of work and careers (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tran, 2012, 2013). Despite these changes, the Vietnamese education system continues to emphasise the

indoctrination of students into nationalist discourses, such as being loyal to national independence and socialism – that the collective good takes priority over an individual's need for freedom and self-determination (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tran, 2012, 2013).

Vietnam's increasing exposure to the global economy and culture has meant that many of its traditional values are now being challenged. Young people have embraced the Internet and social media (and for some, international travel and education), increasing their exposure to Western values such as personal freedom and individualism (e.g. McCauley, Gumbley, Merola, McDonald, & Do, 2016; Nguyen, 2016; Nilan, 1999). Young people are responding to changing workplace conditions by loosening family ties and desiring greater freedom to choose their own careers, which might go against their family's wishes, and/or moving to urban areas to take advantage of the greater career opportunities they afford (Arulmani, 2014; Dang, 2016; Mate et al., 2017). Despite the internalisation of individualistic values, young Vietnamese are still expected to obey their families and to show solidarity with their community and nation, values promoted by the country's ruling communist party (Dang, 2017; Do, Quilty, Milner, & Longstaff, 2007; Grosse, 2015). How students and graduates negotiate these uncharted waters and develop independent self-views are important questions for Vietnam as it moves forward in the 21st century (Marr, as cited in Nguyen and Tran (2014)).

The combined influence of Confucianism, communism, modernism, and globalisation has created a dilemma for many young Vietnamese as they attempt to balance modern global working conditions where career success requires self-awareness, self-direction, and self-determination within the parameters of traditional cultural values that call for prioritising family, community, and nation (Nguyen, 2016). The quote below, taken from the narrative psychologist Dan McAdams (2001), sums up this dilemma:

...in the modern world, the self is a reflexive project that a person is expected to 'work on', to develop, improve, expand, and strive to perfect. Modern people see the self as complex and multifaceted, as containing many layers and depths, and as changing relentlessly over time. At the same time, they feel a strong urge to find some coherence in the self, to fashion a self that is more or less unified and purposeful within the discordant cultural parameters that situate their lives. (p. 115)

Advancing narrative career counselling to Vietnam

Given the current context of work and careers in Vietnam, it is proposed that narrative approaches to

career counselling be considered as an alternative to assist students to reconcile the competing values – between the traditional and the modern – that has become a characteristic of Vietnamese society. For example, a recent study by Mate et al. (2017) required Vietnamese university students to write their 'career story' in order to understand what factors influence their career decision-making. The findings indicate that students developed greater self-awareness through an understanding of the influence that contextual factors such as family (traditional) and media (modern) play on their career choices. It illustrated that a narrative career counselling programme designed for university students made them more aware of the discordant cultural values that shape their career development.

Another important issue in the consideration of narrative career counselling applied to Vietnam is the theory and philosophy that underpins it, which is inclusive of a diverse range of life experiences (subjectivity) and cultural backgrounds. It is predicated on the assumption that human beings use their social, cultural, and linguistic domains to understand themselves, others, and the world as meaningful. 'Narrative is the discourse structure in which action receives its form and through which it is meaningful' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 135). This is important because we argue that career counselling in Vietnam needs to be able to help students understand the complex sociocultural context in which they live and by which they are influenced. In particular, its pressing tasks are to help students deal with the challenges they face in balancing traditional and modern values as they relate to the world of work and in their future careers.

Narrative approaches to career counselling can help students to discover, refine, and adapt their career aspirations to the opportunities and constraints that exist in their culture and in the labour market, so they become better informed, more self-directed and flexible (Clark, Severy, & Sawyer, 2004; Gibson, 2004; Hughes, Gibbons, & Mynatt, 2013; Lapointe, 2010). It does this by developing an understanding of self-identity that is characterised by 'interpretation, variability, relativity and flux' (Crossley, 2000, p. 529). Narrative approaches theorise self-identity as a 'relational' entity. Social interactions and relations, the role that others play in an individual's career, the influence of language in which stories are told, and the discourses of societal institutions (e.g. government, government agencies, the law, the education system, and the media) are considered to constitute its formation. 'Narrative not only helps us to understand the individual self but also gives us a framework for understanding the cultural or social context of that self' (James & Foster, 2003, p. 69). Meretoja (2017) adds that narrating one's life is a 'culturally mediated practice of sense-making' (p. 48).

The evidence for narrative career counselling indicates that it contributes to the development of a reflexive self through the process of narrating life and career stories, reflecting on the meaning they contain, and using this as the basis on which to plan a future career. For example, Clark et al. (2004) employed a narrative approach to group-based career counselling with university students from diverse cultural backgrounds in the USA. On completion of the programme, students were able to articulate their life themes, their educational, career, and life planning process, and were better able to understand the cultural forces that influence their career development.

Thomas and Gibbons (2009) conducted a narrative career counselling programme for students of divorced parents, finding that it helped to develop resilience and confidence when it came to dealing with disruptions to their educational careers. It assisted them to consider possibilities that had been prematurely dismissed, and to face obstacles with plans instead of avoidance, helping them to learn the importance of flexibility when dealing with life's problems. Hughes et al. (2013) employed a narrative career counselling approach to assist 'underprepared' university students (those required to take remedial courses). They found that it provided the opportunity for students to assess themselves and their careers from a broader perspective than would have been the case if the authors had only employed traditional trait and factor approaches. On completion of the narrative career counselling programme, students were better able to understand their cultural backgrounds, the roles that others played in their academic life, and problems they had been struggling with, such as time and financial management.

Narrative career counselling goes beyond identifying a student's values, skills, interests, and personality traits, by linking these to one's past and present life experiences, and the manner in which they are constituted by social, cultural, economic, and political forces (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017; Abkhezr, McMahon, & Rossouw, 2015; Reid & West, 2014). Watkinson and Hersi (2014) used narrative career counselling as a means to prepare adolescent immigrant students from Africa to be college and career ready. The findings indicated that it enhanced the student's career adaptability and self-awareness, and assisted them to develop a career direction that balanced both their family and traditional values with those of the new country to which they had recently moved.

Each of these studies provides a degree of evidence that the narrative/story process assists students to reflect on the meaningful chapters, episodes, and events in their life and career. Students are then encouraged to reflect on these and the influence of sociocultural forces, using this information to think

about and plan for their future careers. As Polkinghorne (1988) notes:

...narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and planning for future actions. (p. 11)

The use of career testing such as the Holland (1985) codes and psychometric testing such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs, 1976) have become commonly used tools by career counsellors in Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union, 2018; VVOB, 2013). This is because they are relatively straightforward and quick to administer. Counsellors and clients believe they have high levels of validity, and they produce an easy-to-interpret result for the client. However, quantitative-based approaches might not always account for the uncertain, insecure, and rapidly changing nature of work and careers (Savickas, 2011). In addition, they are problematic when applied across cultures, because they are based on English language self-assessment questionnaires/scales and closed word/statement exercises that lack translational and conceptual equivalence in the Vietnamese language (see, e.g. Peterson, 2009). The problem with psychometric tests that purport to measure personality traits is the way that personality (elements of self-identity) is interpreted, by ascribing characteristics based on predetermined sets of Anglo-American traits and types that remove the individual from their sociocultural context. As Fouad (1993) noted, standardised vocational and psychometric tests might lack validity when applied across cultures. Narrative approaches have an advantage in this respect, as the client's career stories 'express the uniqueness of an individual; a story of one who is contextualised in time, place and role' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p. 227).

Although standardised psychometric tests are likely to have limited efficacy in the Vietnam context, they are popular career counselling practices that have a place in some circumstances. Our position is that if standardised vocational and psychometric tests are used, then they should complement qualitative-based approaches such as narrative career counselling. A 'blended' or 'integrated' approach was employed by Clark et al. (2004), who had students share their stories of career decisions with other students, such as the reasons for choosing a profession/degree course, changes that have occurred in their life and career journey, significant people and events that have influenced their career choices, and where they see their career story going in the future. Students

then completed a values card sort exercise to see how their values mapped on to their career stories.

Another example of a blended approach is Watson and McMahon's (2015) Integrative Structured Interview Process. This involves completing the Holland (1985) 'personality work environment fit' test, from which clients gain a score on six personality types and are then matched with a work environment and occupation designed to allow them a degree of fit or congruence. The client is then interviewed by the counsellor who asks them a series of open-ended questions designed to illicit a story that explains in more detail their Holland scores.

Although Clark et al. (2004) and Watson and McMahon (2015) included some quantitative assessments, their approaches are predominately based on a qualitative narrative philosophy, which we argue better responds to Vietnam's workplace challenges than stand-alone quantitative approaches. This is because it helps students to develop a deeper understanding of their self-identity within its sociocultural and career context. It emphasises 'subjectivity and meaning' by facilitating 'self-reflection and elaboration of self-concepts toward an enhanced self-understanding that is subjectively and contextually truthful' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p. 228).

Nevertheless, introducing narrative approaches to career counselling in Vietnam would present a number of challenges. To begin with, it is more time consuming and resource intensive, and counsellors need to be more highly trained; in particular, they need to be skilled at drawing out related information from a client's career story and then assisting them to interpret its most meaningful elements. A degree of resistance could also be experienced where quantitative educational testing has become the norm. There is a danger that qualitative approaches might be seen as unscientific and to leave the student without a clear sense of what their future career should be. Arulmani (2015) indicated that this is a problem in India, for example. Qualitative approaches are also more difficult to scale up when seeking to serve large numbers of students. However, both Clark et al. (2004) and Mate et al. (2017) provide practice-based examples of narrative career counselling applied to a group context, illustrating how larger numbers of students can be served by using this approach.

Conclusion

We have attempted to outline the transferability of narrative career counselling into a non-Western culture. It is generally recognised that there are two main types of narrative career counselling, the 'systems theory framework' and the 'theory of career construction' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). However, it is too early at this stage to conclude which type would be most suitable within the context of Vietnam. There is also a good argument to employ a blended approach

initially, such as those set out by Arulmani (2015) or Watson and McMahon (2015). Further research will help to determine this.

Last, the aim of this paper was to stimulate further debate on narrative career counselling within the context of Vietnam. As Arulmani (2014) wrote, Vietnam has a career development system in place, however, it needs to be strengthened by 'making it more modern and culturally and economically relevant to the needs of Vietnamese students and youth' (p. 22). Based on our analysis, narrative career counselling has a number of advantages when applied to Vietnam in the way it develops self-awareness of one's culture, enhances adaptability, provides the opportunity to develop a vision of one's future career based on past and present experiences, and which accounts for the 'cultural structuration of individual experience' (Crossley, 2000, p. 527). Vietnam is currently experiencing a period of transition as it integrates into the global economy while seeking to hold onto to its traditional values. As it does so there is need for career counselling that can respond to the challenges that this transition represents in the way that it constitutes self-identity.

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Notes

1. While Confucian ethics plays an important role, we acknowledge that a number of other social and cultural structures influence social relations and the education system in Vietnam.

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