

Career Counseling and Family Therapy: An Interview with Mark Savickas, PhD

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Logan Vess¹ and Tracy Lara²

Abstract

Mark Savickas, PhD, has taught career counseling at Kent State University for 40 years while also serving as a professor of Family and Community Medicine at Northeast Ohio Medical University. His 80 articles, 45 book chapters, and 500 presentations to professional groups have dealt with vocational behavior and career counseling. He published *Career Counseling* (2011) and edited *Convergence in Career Development Theories* (1994 with R. Lent), *Handbook of Career Counseling Theory and Practice* (1996 with B. Walsh), *Vocational Interests* (1999 with A. Spokane), the *Handbook of Vocational Psychology* (2005 with B. Walsh) and the four-volume *Major Works in Career Studies* (2012 with K. Inkson). An interview with Mark Savickas, PhD, relating to his contributions career counseling revealed many connections between career and family counseling, including the how career concerns are a part of the family constellation. The interview examined the evolution of the career construction interview and similarities in the narrative processes that serve as a foundation for the theory.

Keywords

career counseling, career construction interview, family systems, life design, narrative therapy, postmodern approaches

From 1991 to 1998, he edited the *Career Development Quarterly*. Currently, he is editor for the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (1999-) and also serves on editorial boards for a dozen other journals that span the globe. He is a fellow of the American Counseling Association, the American Psychological Association, and the Association for Psychological Science. He received honorary doctorates from the University of Lisbon (Portugal) and the University of Pretoria (South Africa).

Vess: Family Therapy has been grounded in a systems perspective dating back to Bowen's work in the 1950s. Systems' theory implies interconnectedness and a holistic consideration of the family dynamics in their natural context. Family Therapy also draws from postmodern theory and approaches. For example, narrative therapy places importance upon individual and family stories, as well as meaning making. This is where family therapy intersects with your work on career construction theory and the Career Construction Interview (CCI). However, your work has now introduced a new paradigm, Life Design that encourages counseling professionals to assist clients with their life transitions and the consequences for their health, employment, and intimate relationships.

The questions I have for you will delve into how your work is compatible with family therapy and acknowledges that career concerns are part of the family constellation that must be addressed in the counseling setting.

The Stage Metaphor

Vess: Your love of stories is evident in your use of literary terms. In teaching career construction theory, you have used the metaphor of a play to describe how we are born or presented into our families. It is as if we are stepping into Act 2 of a play and must figure out what happened in Act 1 and adapt to our role as the play goes on. How does an established family system in Act 1 influence the role and identity an individual develops as they are born into Act 2?

Savickas: Well as you know I am not a family therapist, but just from my untrained point of view, as a person comes into the family, they use an old Freudian term, they have to introject the parents and sometimes they swallow whole other things like gender roles and things society gives. These parental influences are swallowed whole, not processed, not

¹ Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA

² Department of Higher Education Administration and Student Personnel, Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Logan Vess, Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, Kent State University, 132 S. Pearl St., Kent, OH, 44240, USA.
Email: lvess@kent.edu

digested, and are inside the person's mind in a complex way. Within the family drama, there are always some kinds of issues. Subtle or overt there are always differences of opinions, disagreements in the values between the two parents. And so, somehow the individual has to reconcile the issues that are going on in the family that have been unrecognized in them, not mirrored or not paid attention to.

Within the family is the birth order too which plays into who else is on the stage with you. I think that we start to develop an early story, an early schema—even talking about attachment theory. Within our families are issues and we spend our life working out those issues. If the issues are not resolved, Freud called it repetition compulsion, you have to keep repeating and repeating, trying to either undo or live through. The Gestalt people talk about an unmet need, and the figure keeps rising and rising again. And so, to me that is the beginning of the life, of how the person is going to navigate their way through. Are we going to talk about role models now or later?

Vess: Yes, that is a beautiful segue into our next question.

The Career Construction Interview

Savickas: To me, then the culture helps. The culture offers affordances; there are latent opportunities in an environment that the person has to recognize. We identify, we compare ourselves to cultural sources role models, heroes and heroines. We identify some who have resolved, if not solved the issues that we are facing. That is why they become heroes and heroines and I think that phrase “role model” is underappreciated, it's thrown out all the time. But, it's truly a model for construction of a self and we model ourselves, but they are not introjected like the parents, they are not swallowed whole.

We take pieces and we identify with pieces and they become identifications, rather than influences. And as you know, I like the example of the two boys in the 1930s at a Cleveland high school who created Superman. What they did is what we all do, they took pieces from characters that were important to them that resolved their issues and put them together. So they took Tarzan's hair, and they took Flash Gordon's outfit, and they took a weight lifter's boots, and if you put those together you have got a picture of the early Superman. Later on we will probably talk about scripts.

The creators of Superman took the story of Moses. Superman, like Moses, was put in a basket and sent to an alien place to lead and help suffering people. One of the reasons that Superman was so important to these two young Jewish boys is that it was also the story of an immigrant, of a person coming

to a new land. You see this is what we all do, that is, to me, your first career choice. You are picking role models to model yourself after, blueprints for your own self-construction.

Erik Erikson talks about how in late adolescence, early adulthood that the task is to take these identifications and unify them in a coherent whole that is now your identity. Stop imitating. We say that if you are still imitating after age 25, it is a real problem. If you are not imitating up until 18, 19 that is a problem too because you have not found a solution.

Vess: I am always just struck by that piece of your work. I provide career counseling for exploratory college students, students who have not yet selected an academic major. Students I work with react with surprise when they recognize how they identify with their role models in their life stories. It is right there in front of them, they just have not seen it yet.

Savickas: It is right there in front of them and our job is not to tell them, but to ask the questions so they tell the stories. So they see it themselves. That is why when I begin [the CCI] I ask, “how can I be useful?” And I listen very carefully, because often the end is already there.

Vess: It is like a [Quentin] Tarantino movie! [Laughs]

Savickas: [Laughs] Yes, yes! It is there and we play the role of audience and help them tell their story. And the telling, I like the phrase narratability, the ability to tell it makes it more real, substantial and often creates room for them to maneuver.

Vess: You have often stated that if you can only ask one of the CCI questions, that the role model question would be the question to ask. Can you share more about this?

Savickas: My rationale for that is that it is the solution they are piecing together. I am interested in early recollections, but that is the problem statement. So, if I can only know one thing it is not the problem that I want to know it is their proposed solution. The proposed solution is very clear in the role models. Each piece. I have worked, Logan, in my life most as a practitioner then it got to a point where I am now, I theorize practice. Most of our colleagues found a theory they liked and practiced. You know, a good theory makes good practice. I have done it the backward way. I found bits and pieces that worked over the years and I have eliminated some things because, they work but . . . “What is your favorite hobby?”, “What were your favorite subjects in school?” But, I have trimmed it to what is most salient. I like the phrase, this is about theorizing practice. So when you ask me about role models, 30 years ago I was asking “who did you admire?” But maybe it was only 15 years ago that I could understand why, put it into words and tell it to other people, if that makes any sense.

- Vess:** Absolutely. The thing I really love about counseling is how much of myself I can bring into it.
- Savickas:** You are the instrument of your own practice [Laughs].
- Vess:** I like that! In the CCI, clients are asked to identify and describe people they admired around the ages of 6–8 years old. Will you discuss why clients are specifically coached not to choose their parents or primary caregivers for these descriptions?
- Savickas:** Just to be extra clear, they did not choose their parents or providers. They were chosen by their parents or providers. And those people are the ones that pass on some issues and some interaction. So, many people, when I say, “Who did you admire?” they will say “mother or father.” I will listen then ask for people outside the family. Now, I will accept brother or sister who is ten years older or an aunt or an uncle. Because I do not think they were swallowed whole. But not if they were raised by grandma.

It is an important distinction because in another way, if we didn't ask early recollections as our quick way to the preoccupation, the alternative is “describe your two parents.” We would listen for, you love them both but they do not agree on everything. Everything does not match perfectly. So we would ask about, “What are your father's key values? What are your mother's key values? What values was there no disagreement?” Mother and father both say, “You will go to church on Sunday.” “What values did they disagree? What was the climate of the home?” So, instead of getting the problem statement in an early recollection we will get a big context of, well in this home there would probably be some issues.

Now, I hope it does not sound psychoanalytic or Freudian because it is not intended. It is intended just as a social learning theory. It is observation and absorption. Co-construction. The child is co-constructing themselves with their parents.

- Vess:** The next CCI question is about favorite magazines or television shows. You have written in your book, *Career Counseling*, from the Theories of Psychotherapy Series, that this question can reveal a client's true interests compared to measured or expressed interests. Can you discuss manifest interests and how a client's family life or home environment may make measured or expressed interests suspect?
- Savickas:** Yes, I spent a lot of time studying interests and interest inventories although they are very good have a hit rate of 40% plus or minus 5% or 10%. But they are the only thing we have to use with groups. But if you can sit with a person it is better just to ask them what do they dream of, what are their aspirations. And some people can't find words for that immediately. The absolute best

way to assess interest is the interests you are manifesting right now, that you are showing by your behavior.

My thinking on this started when I was writing a history of vocational psychology. I can't remember, I think it might have been Bingham, but I can't remember and I can't find the source, but somebody had the idea of an interest museum. They would set up a bunch of exhibits and then they would put the high school students through the museum and time how much time they spent looking at each exhibit with the idea being that the ones they stood and looked at the most is what interested them or attracted them. Then I learned from the early history of TV, Sigourney Weaver was talking about her father, who invented the Today Show. I forget his name, but . . . Mr. Weaver [Laughs] was quite a famous guy in television. She said early on that he said, “Television was a rocket ship that can take you anywhere.” So it dawned on me that television shows show us the world. They take us places and we can vicariously be there. And so I enjoy asking people what television shows are your favorite TV shows, the ones you are not going to miss. That is where they are attracted, that is what is interesting to them. Fewer and fewer people today are reading magazines, but magazines are similar. They are a vicarious environment. If you look in airports, the newsstands, the magazines are grouped together. You can start to see those basic interest codes that Kuder talked about. Television shows sort of replaced magazines, but now the internet is replacing TV. Now we ask about favorite websites. Where do you go? What do you do? It is a true behavioral measure of what attracts you, what interests you, what kind of stage, to use the play metaphor, would you like to insert yourself in.

- Vess:** Seeking these descriptions of setting, action, and results is very similar to family therapy traditions of contextualizing clients' stressors and examining how individuals' identities are constructed through family relations and interactions. Let's talk about the action, the script.
- Savickas:** So now, from the first we have how we can be useful which frames our listening. We have the self that has been constructed, the self-conceptualization. We have the stage. So now that the self is on the stage. We want to know the script, the story that they are going to play out. So this question is always very contemporary, it is, “What is your favorite story right now from a book or a movie?” And of course it changes during their life, as we move to new issues in life and new transitions, we need new stories. But what you will find from the current favorite story is the script for the next coming chapter in their life. And it is usually very, very clear. The reason it is their favorite story now is they are just entering it, they are just entering this stage and it allows us to put the three things together. The self, the stage,

the script and then the fourth question is the favorite saying which is yourself as author directing what you need to do onstage. I want to be sure to at least cover that part.

Vess: Yes, definitely. The best advice you can give yourself, right?

Savickas: Yes. So those are the four questions that hang together. Who were your role models? What are your favorite magazines, TV shows, or websites? What is your favorite book or movie? What is your favorite saying?

Vess: Yes, and thank you for clarifying that. It ties together the stage metaphor very nicely.

Savickas: And those four questions are in my workbook, *My Career Story*, which is free.

Vess: Yes, I have accessed the downloadable workbook at www.vocopher.com among other useful resources for counselors and counselor educators.

Savickas: In *My Career Story* we only ask those four questions. Because it may be too difficult for the person to analyze and understand their early recollections. In individual counseling is when ask the question about early recollections.

Vess: Yes. In family therapy we contextualize issues and it is useful to consider this process in action of how individuals' identities are being constructed through family relations and interactions. How do early recollections reveal clients' preoccupations contextualized in their life stories?

Savickas: Yes. So, the clients are their own therapists. They are working on their own solutions. We are privileged to be audience and watch them do their work and encourage their work. They, as their own therapists, will select the stories that they themselves need to hear right now. These early recollections are very pertinent to whatever issue we are talking about. That is how the inner-authority chooses them. They are not just random. They are not especially fixed.

When I was younger I called them preoccupations. Our preoccupations become our occupations. Before that, I was calling them "pain," working through your pain. I still think I am looking for the pain, but I softened it by calling them preoccupations.

In the last year, I have learned to call it perspective. Which stories are you drawing from, your personal parables and myths that are the perspective that you are using on this current problem. It is the perspective you are bringing forward to shape your future.

When I use pain and preoccupation, people say, "Mine isn't so painful. Mine does not hurt. What does that mean?" Recently I was giving a lecture. Not a client, a person raises their hand and says, "Well mine is when I was 4 years old I was watching my two older brothers jump for joy. Their football team had just won the game and championship and they

were all excited. That has nothing to do with anything." And I said, "Well maybe. Maybe you're an observer on life, rather than participating fully." Her cheeks were blushing. "Maybe it is men who get to have the activity and you sit on the sidelines and watch." She blushes some more. "It is men who know the game and know the score." And she says, "Enough!"

You know, the simpler they are, the more profound they may be. If you remember your house burning down. I mean everybody would remember that. The reason I ask for early memories is not because later ones aren't just as good. A memory from yesterday is just as good, as the hole is in every piece. But the ones from childhood are simple. They are like fairytales, myths, they are healing stories that are just crystal clear. The story from yesterday would be three paragraphs, a lot more complex, and a lot of details and we get so lost we want to know what is going on. But here we see it as they see it in bold relief. So, to me early recollections, they're narratives and they're stories, but they are closer to poetry in their simplicity.

Vess: There is beauty in simplicity. I also pull on Charles Bukowski, but he said, "A smart man says a hard thing in an easy way, but a stupid man says an easy thing in a hard way."

Savickas: [Laughs]

Vess: I have always really liked that. The simpler it can be . . . Like if you take something complex, like that pain and have it in a simple way.

Savickas: And isn't that, in a sense, counseling? Helping the person simplify the complexities so that they can move forward. Well done! Bukowski is a counseling theorist! We never knew! [Laughs]

Vess: Reflecting back on our discussion regarding the play metaphor, how would you describe Act 1 influencing the way individuals recall their early recollections in the CCI?

Savickas: That question escapes me. How would you describe Act 1 influencing the way individuals recall their early recollections in the CCI? Well, it is not . . . Act 1 does not influence. It is not as if these early recollections cause anything or set things in stone. It is among all the things that happened in Act 1, that I have picked up the one or two that give the perspective today and sort of anchor the life theme that I am living. They don't cause anything. They are used as evidence for what your belief.

One of the newest things that I have learned and been studying I came across in the *New York Times* and I traced it's journal origin. There are some researchers in child development who are studying teenagers, young adult's knowledge of family stories. They have a nice instrument you can Google called *Do You Know?* It is 19 questions that they ask. Do you know how your mother and father met? Do you know one of the problems

they had in their early marriage? Do you know, do you know, do you know? Their research, which I enjoy reading, suggests that individuals who know more of their family Act 1, they know more of their family's story, have better ability to tell their story and know their own story to be more resilient, to be more . . . to have more well-being.

The question I did not understand at first is maybe because it is one of my newest learnings. I try and synthesize relevant things. So, when I talk to groups of young people or . . . I am going to talk to some graduating students and their parents and grandparents, I pass it out. I say your homework is at lunch or dinner to pick one thing on there to talk about. To tell them the importance. I always ask for their grandmothers and grandfathers to stand up because they often will spend more time. The more you know about Act 1, the more you know you.

Vess: Wow. Perhaps that would have positive implications for career development too!

Savickas: Absolutely. I am looking for a doctoral student to do a dissertation on *Do You Know* related to career decidedness. [Laughs]

Vess: That sounds great! Again, related to family theory, narrative approaches engage clients as participants in resolving problems and finding solutions. Can you talk more about how events in our lives are attempts to become more whole and how as you have stated "people strive to actively master what they passively suffer?" (Savickas, 2001, p. 56).

Savickas: Yes and that, as you know, I try and simplify all the counseling theories down to one sentence. I like to be able to say it in a sentence. So Freud says, "Where id was, there ego shall be." So where my problem or my pain or my hurt, there shall be my identity. Adler says, "From a felt negative, to a perceived plus." And Jung says, "From misery to meaning." We could go on and on and Narrative therapists talk about reauthoring to move. Rogers, especially through Carkhuff talked about moving from blame to ownership.

I believe narratives are stories and that by studying literary criticism to understand how to appreciate a story. It turns out just like counseling, literary criticism has many theories. There is psychoanalytic, there is Marxian, there is deconstructionist, there is post-structural, there is feminist. So, I tried to formulate my own untutored way, a paradigm or pattern, I call it the narrative paradigm. So, the pattern that I am listening for in the story is how a person, pain, perspective, preoccupation has to be actively mastered, can't be ignored. Well if it is ignored it becomes problematic.

Vess: Yes.

Savickas: We are as sick as our secrets. So, if somebody is very frightened, then I am expecting for them to

feel more whole and complete, and say "I have to become brave." Oprah Winfrey talks about being very very shy and isolated. She can't figure out why in her success now it's the opposite.

I always use their words. And so, what I think the paradigm, the pattern of life, is to become more whole, to heal the hole in our heart. It is whatever hurts, we must attend to. We must invest. That is the sentence that I get quoted on the most, "actively master what you passively suffer."

Fellini, Federico Fellini, says it very simply, "The pearl is the oyster's autobiography." So, our strength, our role models' strengths if we get the answers from role models is also our greatest weakness. You tell me what you are strong at and I know what pain you suffered because you wouldn't be strong at it if you didn't need it.

We talk about going from symptom to solution. Symptom, because I like the s's, to solution, and then social contribution for people who move beyond self. If you tell me an early recollection I have some guesses of what strengths you are going to have to want to acquire or vice versa. So, if you tell me in grade school that you loved mathematics, well who loves $2 + 2 = 4$? Who could fall in love with that? Well, somebody who lives in the house were $2 + 2 = 5$. It is unpredictable or it is chaotic or maybe somebody is abusing substances. One day they are nice to you and the other day they hit you. You can't figure out so you love $2 + 2 = 4$.

Maybe you love history or foreign languages and you would rather be some place else than home. So, we are looking not to interpret, we are asking the person to explain to us to tell us the implications and I would never be so arrogant as to tell a person, "this is what that means" for that will prompt them. I once read a phrase and I liked it, "genius of the counselor is in the questions, not the answers."

I try to teach students who know Sherlock Holmes that beginning counselors try to be Sherlock Holmes and figure things out when it is the client who is Sherlock Holmes and the counselor is Watson asking, "How did you figure that out? How did you see that?" Starting with this literary criticism, your life is a novel and my approach to understanding it is not Marxian or Feminist, it's this narrative paradigm. And so it is the story of your progression or your progression to actively master what you passively suffer. To me it's been a wonderful way of understanding stories, but not the only way. I'm sure family therapists . . . everybody would have their own way. But I think it is the essence of most counseling theories.

Defined within each theory. The Gestalts, make it whole. They will find solutions that are missing. The figures, the needs Anyway I try to see what is the wisdom offered by the different counseling theories and therapy theories rather the attempt to be a club or a brand.

Vess: Or a guild.

Savickas: Yeah, a guild. They are communities of scholars. [Laughs]

Life Designing as a Family Project

Vess: There we go. [Laughs] You, along with your colleagues as part of the International Research Group (2009) put forth that, "Life-design counseling includes career construction yet goes beyond it in attending to self-construction through all life roles, because for some people work may not be the salient role." How does life design counseling attend to a client's family experiences and/or roles?

Savickas: Yes, this is something I would like to know myself [Laughs]. You see I realized I was only talking about career, not about life and that sometimes people are not allowed to be themselves at work and they have to work just for money. And so then we encourage them to be themselves at leisure and in faith communities. And as we learn more about the global society in a postmodern era, I realized that work no longer loves you back, no longer makes a commitment like it did.

In the second half or maybe the whole 20th century people are returning to anchoring their lives more than ever, or at least like their great-grandparents were in family, in faith communities, and even in place. I am going to live in Kent, no matter where I have to work. And so, to design a life in this postmodern digital age of a fragmented society, niche society, we have to attend to all the roles.

I have been around research on how to use leisure in conjunction with work. But at the moment, the thing I am intrigued with and would like to talk with your colleagues about is how does everything we are saying about career apply to partner selection? There has got to be some connections to life partner choice, boyfriend and girlfriend choice. I am thinking somewhere in the world there is a group of people who are saying the same things that I am saying about career, but they are saying it about marriage and family and dating. And I would love to learn from them and expand. I would like to have conversations saying what I say, and hearing what they say because it has to Because my fundamental belief is that we use work to become more whole, but we also use play and prayer and love. I would like to synthesize some ideas from marriage and family that might apply. If you or any of your readers have leads . . . [Laughs] When I meet a family therapist, I ask but I don't get much. I am not sure I am clear, but you understand what I am asking . . . In the most simple way, could I sit down with a person to talk about their choice of partner or pending partnership in the same way we are talking about career?

Vess: Exactly. My wheels were turning and I was kind of thinking about . . . Could the CCI, some of the questions, some of the things that it is aiming for in a person . . . Could that also look at partner relationships? It's making a lot of sense in my brain, at least

Savickas: That is the area that I would like to . . . If I could have a sit down or if I knew where to go [Laughs]. If I knew what literature to read. Because we need to expand, to design the life. It is not life planning because it is hard to plan in the fragmented society, right? So, we started this little part here with your question with me saying, "I'd like to know too."

Vess: Thank you and I look forward to the response from the Family Journal subscribers to your invitation. In the article you coauthored about life design as a new paradigm (2009), careers were described as being based on the society norms of education, work and family. In the 21st century how has this shifted?

Savickas: Yes. That is a whole big topic. So, what is called the first demographic of evolution by the Sociologists is when people came to the cities a normative structure appeared. A normative way of living your life appeared. The order was: go to school, get a job, get married, you have kids And as the 20th century proceeded that normative structure got tighter and tighter and tighter and it started to make the two genders, sexes closer, closer in timing of what should happen and when it should happen. And of course there is always problems with sexism, but there was a very strong mandate.

The second demographic of evolution according to sociologists, started, if you can pin it down exactly, the 1973 oil crisis is when they think the shift started and what the shift has been is that we have moved from a regulated, controlled, normative approach to individualization. If you could have one word to describe the global society in a postmodern world, the digital revolution, it's individualization. The norms have become fragmented, almost disappeared. Some people get a job and then go to school, never get married. Some people The order is up to the individual. I believe 2010, I'd have to look, that was the first year that more women who had babies, 50.3% were unmarried than married. So, the old rules, mom's rules, grandma's rules don't apply, and it is not scandalous, if 50.3% are unmarried out of wedlock. And I love the phrase "wedlock" [Laughs], somebody has found a key And so now it's called, one of the European philosophers, Beck calls it a risk society.

Everything is risky, chancy, there is no planning possible in a world of uncertainty. The only that is left for the individual is their own story, their own autobiography. That is why when you face a transition, we do what we do. So, we have moved from a normative life, organized and strong communities to a fractured, niche society of individuals. When I was your age we had three TV channels. Now, we have, what 250 plus the Internet. And people, social commentators are saying we are losing our shared sense of culture because everybody didn't watch Ed Sullivan Sunday night. They watched 200 different things.

The world is changing and that is why I became so interested in this, the 20th century approach to careers was resemblance. They would give you a test and say oh you resemble an autoworker, you resemble a professor. Life design, career construction, 21st century approach is about uniqueness. Who are you? How are you unique? How are you going to use the world?

Twentieth century, who you resemble, how is the world going to use you? It's a big, big switch in the way we live and not everybody is comfortable with it. Because the established trajectories and predictabilities are dissipating. For example, in this building where we sit only 40% of the faculty have tenure-track positions with health insurance and pensions. Sixty percent are adjunct, temporary, contingent, part-time and that's throughout the United States. Recently President Obama spoke of part-time American because most of the new jobs that they brag about creating are part-time and now we are seeing that prediction that was made when I was in graduate school that we would lose the middle class. That has become a hot issue this year. Pay inequality, part time, contingent work with no pensions That is why the minimum wage had to be raised.

So, we need to attend to the second demographic revolution, if you want to read that in sociology. That's what I try to do. I try and pull things. The reason I love, my whole life, working on the issue of work is that I could study philosophy of work, theology of work, psychology, sociology, I collect books of poems about work. There is artwork, I collect songs about work. It gives a focus to my reading and my attention. But it is never boring because there are all these different ways of looking at it.

Vess: This idea of cultural fragmentation resonates with me. I actually don't have cable, I just watch Netflix and control what I watch . . . [Laughs].

Savickas: So at the so-called water cooler everybody watched what? It is beginning to be a problem when I ask favorite TV show, somebody just told me, I forget what she called it, Power Girls or? I can't remember, I said well what is that about, it's about World War II female aviators. Where is that? Well it's on Netflix. What's Netflix? So let's get down, what is it about? It's about empowering women. Okay that is what you are interested in.

Vess: There it is.

Savickas: But, still I don't know [Laughs]. And I guess I don't have to know, they have to know.

Vess: In life design theory, the concept of the biographical bridge is introduced. Can you share more about that?

Savickas: Yes, that is from a German scholar named Heinz and he called it a new phase. He is a developmental psychologist, a new phase, a life transition they use autobiographical reasoning to work your way through it. You use your life story, it's what we do. It is what we are talking about. We are

facilitating autobiographical reasoning. Of course in my writings I give him credit.

I like alliteration, as you can tell, so biographical bridge is we are using our biography to move from the old situation to the new situation to bridge the two together. I also use the word brickollage. Where we take pieces of things and you reassemble to create a new you. It's from anthropology, from Strauss. But, the fundamental idea in your life is a novel, the novel has chapters. When you come to the end of a chapter and you are facing a blank page to start the new chapter. The only way to start is to remember what came before it.

You use that autobiography to get your toe into the new place, the bridge. We are mixing metaphors, but the barrier is the writer's block and something that we are trying to remove, the barrier that is stopping you from easily accessing your inner authority. That is what we are trying to undo, the writer's block. They try and use positive language like I use the word "undecided." They don't like that word because, well you can't make the decision you are undecided. I like, for example, in college that people use "undeclared." I haven't declared my major, I haven't declared myself. It is not that I am undecided, it's not that I don't need declaration. But I am not ready to make a commitment. So like any postmodern, deconstructionist I am very interested in word choice and using words that open possibilities.

Vess: How do you feel about instead of using "undeclared" or "undecided," using the term "exploratory"?

Savickas: That's great! Yes, that's perfect. But on their college application when they apply to college were they asked what their major is, was there a box that said "exploratory"?

Vess: I believe so.

Savickas: That's wonderful. And if not, get to work [Laughs]!

Vess: Right [Laughs]! The life design intervention model consists of six general steps. In brief they are (a) the counselor works with the client to identify the problem, (b) exploration of the client's system of subjective identity forms, (c) opening perspectives, (d) placing the problem in a new story, (e) specifying activities to actualize an identity, and (f) follow up. In the fifth step, what role may parents or caregivers play as an individual tries on activities to actualize an identity?

Savickas: Well I want to back up a little bit.

Vess: Sure.

Savickas: About the five steps you just specified, they are not my approach to life design. It is in the article. The article is joint collaboration with an international team. Those five steps that you just outlined are from Jean Guichard who is my great friend. In the English-speaking world, we have our

prominent theorists and the French Francophile they have theirs and Jean is a leading and loved great theorist doing similar work to me, but not the same. We're very close, we are very intellectually close, we are very friendly, but we differ just a little bit. Those five, six are his. In life design, we used his.

Mine is simpler. [Laughs] Mine is simpler. We take the . . . Well I shouldn't say simpler. His are simple too, his are wonderful. But, mine is we construct a story together. First we create a safe space, same as anybody. Then I am asking these five questions to get micro stories, small stories to get with the client to construct a beginning story that becomes a macro, big story. We put the pieces together and send back into their biography. Then if any are very troublesome, we deconstruct, deconstruct the bad parts but step two usually is now this reconstruction of how can this story be elaborated. What in this story are you aware of that creates new space? What barriers can we unblock? What new possibilities can we open? So, that is the reconstruction and that is usually what I do in creating a life portrait.

The first session is collect stories. Second is to say back to the client, reconstruction, this is what I heard. This is the self, on the stage, with this script, with this perspective, with this advice. Then the third step is we co-construct together an advancement on the story that elaborates and allows the person to move forward. So my steps are construct, reconstruct, and then co-construct together.

Another way I like to say it is we first explore the tension by paying attention to it, by listening to it, and facilitating the movement from attention to intention. And awareness now allows for choice. Awareness clarifies what is at stake and it enhances the ability to decide, allows choice. And then we want extension into the real world.

I wasn't doing it on purpose, but in retrospect I have found that it follows Kolb's learning theories. I start with the concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation. You can tell, I mean . . . And there is a Belgian theory about sifting and shifting and has the same four things. What validates me is when I can find the same process with different words in many, like we do with the counseling theories. If it works in learning theory and it works in creative writing in Belgium in prose, it is good enough for me. And it gives me a place to go.

The question about the fifth step: well what role do parents and caregivers play? They play the critical role of audience. So when you leave us, and you go tell your loved ones, your partners, your parents, your neighbors, you are better able to narrate, you are better able to tell. I record every session and I tell people to play the recording for those who love you because they are the audience. Their role is the audience to encourage and support. They are going to have a hard time enacting this script if the audience is not going to applaud, is not going to pay attention, is not going to recognize, is not going to validate. What we end with is now, what audience are you going to take this story that you have just created with me

. . . Who are you going to tell? Who is going to support this story? Who is going to be applauding the story? Which I think is that, from family therapy, from White and Epston, narrative therapy . . .

Vess: Finding that audience can take you from the problem saturated story into the preferred story. Once you are living that story, you need an audience.

Savickas: That is probably where I took it from. Take the pieces and put them together. I once said to my greatest mentor, who is Don Super, I said, "Don, me and you just steal from everybody!" and he goes, "Mark, me and you don't steal, we synthesize." [Laughs]

Vess: I think it was Picasso or Warhol that said, "Good artists borrow, great artists steal." [Laughs]

Savickas: [Laughs] I try and give credit. I try and give credit.

Vess: There is a Ted Talk that is called "Steal Like An Artist." It is about how it is not possible to reinvent the wheel.

Savickas: No.

Vess: All we can try to do is push that wheel forward.

Savickas: Yes, take the best and stand on their shoulders. Yes.

Vess: And I think, just on a personal note, that is why I have connected so much with your work and your theory is because it does pull from all these other theories that I found resonance with. So, synthesizing that with career has just been remarkable. In a way, it sounds like you are describing life designing as a family project.

Savickas: Yes. [Laughs] Nicely said, yes. Saradt called it "Career Project." Life is a project. And of course it is a family project. My daughter's career is part of my wife and my life project. I was a project of my grandmother, mother and father. Yes, I remember we earlier were talking about knowing your family story and carrying on the family legacy. The old career choice theory in the 40s and 50s called it occupational inheritance. We still have it to a degree today. We follow family business. One of your family therapist professor's daughters is studying family therapy. I mean so many professors' children become professors and mechanics and dentists. Many people dream of their children going into the family business, the family enterprise. Many family wars are over revenge. On Sunday night television, which you have never heard of, right now one of the story lines is this great French entrepreneur has this big business and he is leaving it all to his son who is not very confident, not reliable, not trustworthy. And this super prepared, talented, groomed daughter is to get nothing. For centuries, we have had the law of primogeniture. The boy gets to carry forward.

Yes, they are family projects and it is unfortunate that you and I encounter some young people who are not a family project. They are detached, they don't have a sense of belonging. Work and career is a social contribution, it is a social role. It participates in the community. And for those whose first community of family has gone poorly, work becomes very difficult because they don't have support teams, the audience who has started the project and encourages the project. But, again a family therapist could probably talk much more about that than I can.

Vess: There is a great film called *The Way, Way Back*, I am not sure if you are familiar with it, it was kind of an independent film. But it is about a guy and his family life isn't great. Mom is with a stepdad who is somewhat abusive. So they go on a summer vacation for like 4 months and he starts sneaking out and working at this waterpark. What he finds at that waterpark is what becomes his family. Through this work, from the things he is doing, he finds his first real family. It's a beautiful story. Just kind of made me think of this

Savickas: Say it again, the name.

Vess: *The Way, Way Back*.

Savickas: I'll have to look into that. Reminds me of, what was the rather new movie Larry Cochran, British Columbia talked about the family drama at work. Which I am sure family therapists You take that old Act 2 issue and some of Act 1 issue and you bring it to work everyday. He has some wonderful publications where the boss is like one of your parents and the siblings and he has done some very interesting research on how we recreate the family drama at work.

That is not so much an interest of mine because that is work adjustment, that is work success. I stay very focused on choices. But that would be a whole, that is a whole new It is the two wings of vocational psychology are choice and adjustment. So the adjustment at work, the ability to go there everyday and get along and feel belongingness also has roots in these very same things we are talking about. People are dealing with problems at work and need counselors to assist them.

Vess: I have one more question. Are there any further comments you would like to add to encourage family therapists to attend to the working lives of their clients as part of the holistic counseling process?

Savickas: Well, you know, going back historically Freud said, every good psychoanalysis of a client should end with discussion of its implication for career and for marriage. He said people should not make any decisions about these major life roles while

they are doing their therapeutic work. But, therapeutic work is not finished until the new stories and the new solutions are applied.

Carl Rogers, one of the most scientific, people don't pay attention anymore, but he had one of the best scientific theories of counseling and theories of personality. He has a stage model where there are seven stages of the therapy. And he said career issues you should not be addressed until stage five. Stage five. If you made a new you, therapy is to change the story, right? Well, if it is changed and it is changed successfully it has implications for your identity, your vocational identity, that new self in the new world of work. So, for example if therapy has increased your confidence maybe now you can pursue something you were afraid of before. Or, if maybe something in the marriage relationship has been resolved it may open new doors. Family therapists would know that better than I.

In life design we are interested in all the roles and one of the 20th century problems has been specialization. Building silos. So we have family therapists and career counselors and group counselors and we have rehab counselors and we have and we have and we have. We have licenses. We have substance abuse. It is just one person. It is just one person. That is why I was saying before I love to learn from family therapists. How could I add, rather than saying they should add career to their work. I want to say, how can I add family involvement and intimacy into my work? To deal more with life and I would dream I don't see it happening yet . . . but that our curriculum for counseling be redesigned. Right now we have all these specialist courses and we expect you, Logan, to go to practicum and put them all together in your head. You walk into practicum and you ain't got a clue.

Vess: Right.

Savickas: Because your education has been so fragmented. So, it would be nice if we could slowly move to a new curriculum that was not specialty oriented but life oriented, more holistic and Some of my ideas on that are to start early and go often in case studies that are team taught by different faculty with different perspective. There are ways to do it, maybe in a doctoral seminar could try it. But our education, our specialty boards, our licenses, American Psychological Association has over 54 divisions. Counseling has what, 12 divisions? Twelve journals? And the word division, they take seriously. They divide us, they fracture us, they scatter us. So, I think it's your generation that is going to rearrange and reformulate the way we try and help people with the best way possible.

Vess: That is again why I like your theory so much. It might just be personal preference, but you took a lot of the theories that really kind of spoke to me and created a synthesis of it

Savickas: Well can we stop calling it “my theory” and call it “our theory”?

Vess: Our theory! Yes!

Savickas: That would be a nice ending.

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