

## Integration of Career and Personal Counselling:

### *Future Selves as an Organising Theme*

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#### **Abstract**

A review of the literature on the relationship between personal and career counselling concludes that the two are more similar than different, that effective career counselling is akin to general counselling in terms of outcomes, process and content, and that when the two are integrated clients are more satisfied. Possible selves theory is then presented as a convenient framework in which to integrate personal and career counselling, without making unrealistic calls on counsellor and client time. An example of how possible selves theory does this is then presented.

#### **Career v personal counselling**

Are career and personal counselling essentially similar or fundamentally different? This is a controversial issue. Those in the similarity camp include prominent names such as Betz and Corning (1993); Gysbers, Heppner and Johnson (1998); Imbimbo (1994); Krumboltz (1993), and Lewis (2001). Another camp recognises that the two overlap but suggests they are distinct domains (Crites, 1981; Nathan & Hill, 1993). The case for similarity can be summed up in the Savickas (1993) line that the “career is personal”. The case for fundamental difference centres round an argument that career issues are remote from personal ones. The issue is important because it says a lot about who can competently do career work, and what clients are likely to get from it.

The picture is further confused with a range of different terms used in different contexts, such as career guidance, vocational guidance, career development and career advice and consultancy. Nowadays we can add life coach!

The position of the authors is that while there is specific knowledge that career counsellors require, the two professions are more similar than different, as recent research has shown.

#### **The New Zealand scene**

The economic and labour market reforms of the 1990s meant that a wide range of

individuals and groups who previously may have had reasonable job and employment security were thrown back on their own resources to find work and employment. Furthermore, the cost of tertiary study, coupled with its growth in availability, increased the demand for career guidance.

Consequently, a variety of people all identifying as careers practitioners have emerged. More recently, the careers industry has regrouped and gained a new professional identity with the growth of the Career Practitioners' Association. While this has been a positive move and has ensured more accountability and professionalism, it has also heightened the perception of the differences between career and personal counselling. NZAC data reflects this: of the current membership (2376), only 99 members (or 2.5%) say that they identify as career counsellors.

This article looks at recent research that argues strongly for a more integrated definition of the career and personal counselling fields. It looks at the similarities in terms of process and content, and contends that the schism between the two fields is one of perception that needs to be countered. It presents possible selves theory as an accessible model for integration.

### **Research findings: a matter of perception?**

Recent research shows that both counsellors and clients perceive differences between career and personal counselling.

Imbimbo (1994, p. 51) says "career counselling is perceived as *active and directive* whilst personal counselling is viewed as *facilitative and exploratory*". She wonders if it is perceived that career counselling has been reduced to testing and information giving, thereby reducing the richness of the work.

Lewis (2001) highlights the difference between the expectations of career and personal clients. Her study finds that career clients had lower motivation for staying in counselling than did clients with personal issues. She notes (Corbishley & Yost, 1989, cited in Lewis, 2001, p. 87) that:

*... career clients seem to have inaccurate expectations about the counselling process, including the perception that counselling can be accomplished in two sessions.*

Krumboltz (1993, p. 148) comments:

*Some universities provide separate administrative units for career counselling and for personal counselling. The fact that they are separate agencies is a symptom of the problem, not a justification for the distinction.*

He questions what this does for clients, and concludes:

*Compartmentalising [clients'] concerns diminishes our ability to see how their feelings, beliefs, abilities and interests are interconnected.*

Warnke et al. (1993, p. 180) comment that one of the consequences of separating career from personal counselling is that often career counselling is depicted as “drab, routine and less challenging compared to personal counselling”.

Warnke et al. also noted that some counselling students approaching a career counselling practicum considered it a subset of psychotherapy, while others perceived career counselling as a specialised field so vastly different from personal counselling that they believed themselves to have limited abilities to provide career interventions.

*However, as they became familiar with the techniques and instruments specific to career interventions, they reduced their anxieties and explored the unique contributions of career counselling as well as the inherent relationships between career and personal counselling (Warnke et al., 1993).*

## **The case for integration**

### **Better outcomes**

The research shows that addressing personal issues during career counselling increases client satisfaction. For instance, Nevo (1990) showed that clients who sought career counselling were more satisfied with the experience when both personal and career issues were addressed. Kirschner et al. (1994) found that focusing on personal issues during career counselling, such as the role of personality, contributed to the resolution of career concerns.

### **Similarities in process and how tests and instruments are used**

Career counselling, viewed as a developmental process, draws strongly from client-centred counselling as advocated by Rogers (1951), feminism (Forrest & Brooks, 1993) and the constructivist worldview (Peavy, 1998; Savickas, 1993). These approaches shift focus away from the presentation of “expert knowledge” toward the quality of the counselling relationship (McMahon & Patton, 2002). This shift in process occurred in response to pressure to be more culturally responsive, and to talk with clients rather than at them. It represents a shift toward engagement and away from administering tests, telling clients what to do and handing out brochures.

Career and personal counselling compare on both process and outcome measures (Lewis, 2001). Except in the area of expectations about counselling, there are no significant differences in the Lewis study between career counselling and personal

counselling. The study highlighted the role of the working alliance in the counselling process and found that it was comparable in strength for both career and personal counselling clients. The importance of the working alliance calls into question the ways in which career tests are used and implications for career practitioners who might rely on a “test them and tell them” approach:

*Counsellors must not be beguiled into the belief that computerised guidance systems make attention to the working alliance redundant. Instead, counsellors need to think about how they can adapt technology so it can facilitate the counselling process (Lewis, 2001).*

### Similarities in client level of distress

Multon et al. (2001) explored psychological distress as a variable in career counselling and found that 60% of the sample (as opposed to 13% in a normal population) who presented for career counselling in a naturalistic setting were psychologically distressed using two recognised psychological distress instruments. This had the following implications:

*These findings indicate that counsellors who work with adult career clients should be aware of psychological distress and should be trained in psychological assessment, career counselling and psychotherapy skills... Furthermore, having this knowledge of clients' psychological distress emphasises the need for counsellors to view clients holistically and be able to integrate the goal of psychological and career adjustment into their counselling treatment plan.*

Career and non-career clients often experience comparable levels of emotional discomfort (Gold & Scanlon, 1993). However, such emotions are often wrongly ignored in career work (Figler, 1989). Career issues are often presented as very rational issues based on prospects, money, opportunity for travel or some other sensible attribute. However, this often belies, for both practitioners and counsellors, what is really going on. Figler (1989) writes:

*Emotions are the genie in the bottle of career development, the winds whipping around inside a client, while s/he wears the polite mask of reasonableness. For career counsellors to be fully effective, they must unbotle the emotions that often accompany clients' struggles towards career goals.*

### Similarities in content

Much has been written about changes in the world of work in the past few decades.

No longer is a “job for life” relevant (Watts, 1996). In an environment of uncertainty and constant change, the employment market is increasingly characterised by a growth in the number of self-employed, part-time, contract and casual workers and a widening of the gap between the increasingly overemployed and the unemployed. As McMahon and Patton (2002) say, “Workers now find themselves in a ‘foreign’ world of work, facing a complex array of issues for which many are ill-prepared. Thus occupational choice is only one of a myriad of concerns that individuals bring to career counsellors.”

They make the point that individuals may revisit career decision-making and access career services several times during their lifetime.

As the needs of clients have expanded in an increasingly complex world, the concept of career has continued to broaden to acknowledge all aspects of an individual’s life (McMahon & Patton, 2002). Savickas’ (1993) claim that the “career is personal” is borne out by research that indicates that career issues and non-career issues, such as socio-emotional problems or family concerns, often appear concurrently in counselling. Anderson and Niles (1995) found that more than a third of the problems presented by clients during career counselling were not career related.

Lewis (2001) concludes that subscribing to an integrative definition of career counselling is even more crucial when one considers issues of diversity, including race, gender and disability. For members of these groups, career decisions are not made in isolation. For instance, among members of some racial minority groups, decisions –including career decisions – are often made within the context of family and relationships.

This requires a holistic approach – as recommended by Lee and Johnston (2001) in their paper looking at recent innovations in career counselling. They cite Bluestein and Spengler (1995) to say:

*A holistic perspective, one that does not separate career from psychosocial issues, is a particularly appropriate career counselling approach given today’s work environment. First, the increased unemployment and uncertainty experienced by individuals now and in the future may translate into increased family discord, anxiety, and adjustment disorders (Lee & Johnston, 2001, p. 78).*

Furthermore ...

*pursuing a successful “self-managed” career will involve more than gaining occupational knowledge and specific training; it will require developing positive psychological attitudes such as tolerance of ambiguity, resilience, proactivity, and openness that can be applied to the work arena. A holistic perspective will prepare*

*us as counsellors to deal with all these issues in an integrated way that targets all relevant aspects of a client's experience* (Lee & Johnston, 2001, p. 78, citing Bluestein & Spengler, 1995).

We conclude that the schism between career and personal counselling is unhelpful for clients and out of step with calls for holism and integration.

### **A way forward**

What is needed is a way forward that allows career counsellors to adopt a more holistic view without demanding unrealistic amounts of time either of themselves or their clients. It also needs to allow clients themselves to define the boundaries of their career counselling session, rather than have career counsellors determine which “variables” or issues are most important. If career counsellors are going to be more holistic, they are going to have to cover a lot of ground quickly – to sift through a lot of information to determine what are the real issues that can realistically be dealt with effectively.

Possible selves theory offers a way forward for counsellors or other career practitioners to adopt a holistic approach that is also practical in terms of available resources. Possible selves first appeared prominently in the psychology literature in the mid-1980s (see Markus & Nurius, 1986). The historical antecedents of possible selves include Rogers' (1961) depiction of personal goals and the fully functioning person, Maslow's (1954) conception of a hierarchy of needs which act as future goals, and Levinson's (1978) depiction of personalised and idealised “dreams”.

Possible selves are the images, senses and thoughts relating to a person's self in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). They include what is feared and expected, and they cover emotions (e.g. happy, sad), career situations (e.g. lawyer, unemployed, lots of variety, bored), personal beliefs about the self (e.g. “liked”, “lacking confidence”) and lifestyle (e.g. wealthy, “addicted to drugs or alcohol”). Possible selves can maintain general themes but can alter in response to changes in the life course and other issues of context (Cross & Markus, 1991). Thus a possible self as “successful” can evolve from a more specific self-representation, such as being a good student, good employee or good parent. They provide a strong organising theme for many established ideas in career counselling, such as life roles (Super, 1980), beliefs and cognitions (Krumboltz, 1994) and interests (Holland, 1985).

### **The New Zealand possible selves instrument: future selves**

In New Zealand, possible selves have been researched as a practical approach for career development (Plimmer, 2001), including the use of a computerised questionnaire

that covers skills and interests, career options, values and self-beliefs, and lifestyle. The instrument has reasonable test retest properties (.73) and its concurrent validity with life satisfaction, self-esteem and optimism/pessimism demonstrates reasonable concurrent validity (between 23 and 27% of the variance is explained by possible self responses).

However, its practical strength is not as a measurement tool but as a gateway for accelerated, holistic counselling with clients (Plimmer, 2001). Possible selves have potentially strong applicability to a career intervention because of their relationship to well-being and motivation (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992); coping with transitions (Linville, 1985), and resistance to setbacks (Cross & Markus, 1994). Possible selves also have a strong fit with good career counselling practice in their link to a positive future focus (Spokane, 1996). They represent highly personalised goals. Possible selves are also changeable, thus they can help with adaptability (Savickas, 1997).

In the New Zealand possible selves research, clients go through the computerised inventory (known as Future Selves), receive a graphic output, then use this as a framework for career counselling. The computerised questionnaire first asks clients to write in their own words their hopes and fears (described below as the free text section). Clients are then presented with a series of items which first identifies and rates the strength of their hopes and fears, asks how likely they are to become real, and whether that self has occurred yet. These hopes and fears are then presented graphically back to the client, with the hope/fear question plotted on the y-axis and the likelihood question plotted on the x-axis.

Thus, clients and counsellors see a constellation of hopes and fears rated as likely or unlikely to take place. For the sake of convenience likely hopes are classified as opportunities, unlikely hopes as dreams, unlikely fears as dreads, and likely fears as threats. Whether they are “past” or “present”, or “to date not yet experienced”, hopes or fears about the future are indicated by small shapes next to the item.

What follows is an example of the application of the possible selves approach in which the computerised inventory (Future Selves) was administered, after which two counselling sessions took place based on the feedback provided by the questionnaire.

### Example of application

Jason’s background details are:

- 25 years old
- Pakeha
- Long term unemployment benefit
- School bursary

- Part time, undeclared bar work
- Provincial city

In the free text section, where clients write their own high-level hopes and fears, Jason wrote the following.

Hopes:

*I hope that I will be able to enjoy life to its fullest. Relaxed; no stress; no hassles from people; able to do my own thing.*

Fears:

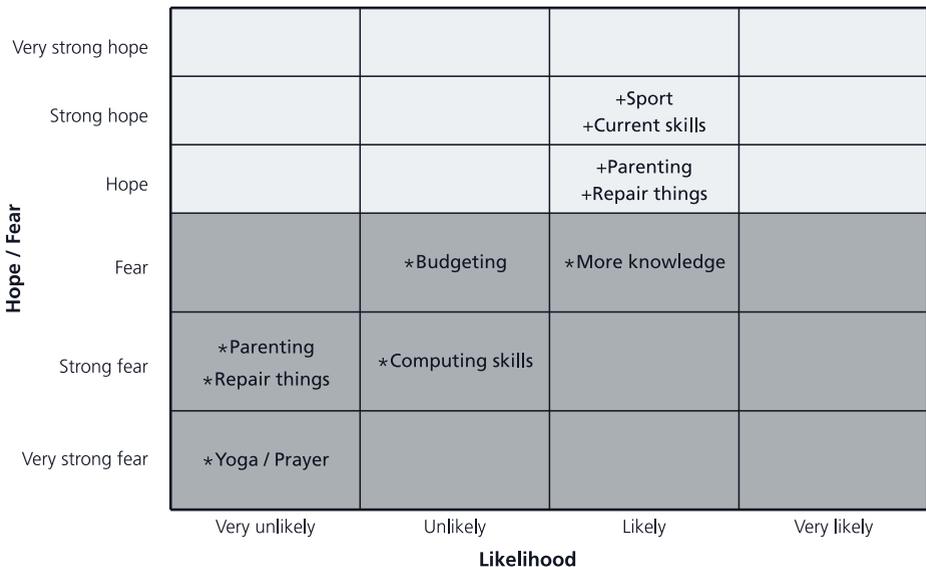
*That I'll be stuck in a 9–5 job that I hate.*

*That I won't be able to do the stuff that I want to do, e.g. surf, hang out with friends etc.*

The hopes show a strong emphasis on autonomy: “no hassles ... able to do my own thing”.

Jason’s fears echoed a similar theme, emphasising time with friends and for surfing. There was no mention of work other than fear of being stuck in a 9–5 job.

**Figure 1: Skills and interests**



**Category** + = Past and/or present self \* = Neither past nor present self

### Skills and interests

Jason’s graphic feedback for the skills and interests section is shown in figure 1.

The skills and interests section of the feedback showed a limited number of skills around “sport”, “maintaining current skills”, “parenting”, and “repairing things”. These all showed some past experience of participating in them, as shown by the small shape + next to the item. A number of fears, rated as unlikely to occur, were also mentioned: “budgeting”, “computing skills”, “languages”, “writing” and “yoga/prayer”.

Jason’s skills and interests had very little work-related content. The number of fears showed issues around learning skills that may have been of work value. They also show he had no experience of them (as shown by the shape \*) and had rated them as unlikely to happen in the future. The subsequent discussion revealed quite crystallised thoughts around avoiding new career-related activities.

### Career options

Jason’s responses to the career options section are shown in figure 2.

The work options section indicated opportunities in “hospitality”, “working with

**Figure 2: Career options**

Hope / Fear	Very strong hope				
	Strong hope				+Hospitality +Work in people +Customer services
	Hope		+Government worker +Drive/operate cars	+Labourer +How things work +Farming/gardening	
	Fear	*Clerical worker *Work in army	*Creative work *Electronic worker	+Shop assistant +Factory worker	
	Strong fear	*Working 9-5 *Heavy equipment			
	Very strong fear				
		Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely

**Category** + = Past and/or present self \* = Neither past nor present self

people”, “labouring” and other vocational opportunities – although none were very strong. There were also fears around “clerical work”, the “armed forces” and doing creative work.

Discussions revealed some cautious interest in working again, provided various criteria were met around high levels of autonomy and social contact. At this point some discussion took place around formal training in hospitality, or more permanent work in the hospitality sector. Concerns were expressed around the loss of leisure time and the risk of boredom.

**Personal values and attributes**

Jason’s responses to the personal attributes and values section are shown in figure 3.

This section revealed socially oriented opportunities (attractive, approachable, doing things well) and dreams (hopes but low likelihood) of being “comfortable with myself”, “creative” and “self-disciplined”. The latter were rated as not being part of either his past or present. In the discussion he affirmed the importance of relationships, and indicated he enjoyed his friends but that partners often tired of his con-

**Figure 3: Personal valves and attributes**

Hope / Fear	Very strong hope				
	Strong hope			+Attractive +Approachable +Do things well	
	Hope	*Creative *Disciplined	*Comfortable with myself	+Loving	+Open minded
	Fear		+Not very bright *In decline *Set in my ways	+Lack confidence +Depressed +Unmotivated +Bored	
	Strong fear	*Mean	+A leader		
	Very strong fear			+Dissatisfied with life	
		Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely

**Category** + = Past and/or present self \* = Neither past nor present self

strained range of activities. When asked why he rated being “comfortable with myself” as unlikely and not yet experienced he was initially avoidant but then mentioned envy of other friends who were now “doing something and getting some new stuff”. He also mentioned that it was harder to maintain social contact as friends drifted away or friendships went stale.

There were a surprising number of fears recorded, considering the earlier responses and his relaxed demeanour in the discussion. Discussion around the fears rated as likely to succeed (lacking in “confidence”, “depressed”, “unmotivated”, “bored”, and “dissatisfied with life”) showed that they were real but largely socially masked. They were also past and present parts of his life.

Jason revealed that despite the desire for autonomy and time with friends, the current lack of structure and aimlessness was distressing – the low work ethic appeared to be a defence mechanism against the effects of unemployment, rather than a cause of it. Discussion turned to the consequences of remaining in the current lifestyle, with Jason eventually deciding that his future selves profile would likely get progressively more negative over coming years.

**Figure 4: Lifestyle**

<b>Hope / Fear</b>	Very strong hope			+Enjoying life +Lots of evidence	
	Strong hope			+Work part time +Lots of friends +Involved in a club *Be a good parent	+Simple life
	Hope			*Not very bright +In decline +Set in my ways	+Benefit
	Fear	*Involved in crime *Lose touch	*Solo parent *Lose what I have		
	Strong fear				
	Very strong fear	*Having no free time *Lots of stress	*Be unhealthy		
		Very unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very likely

**Category** + = Past and/or present self \* = Neither past nor present self

Some discussion took place around what choices he could or was making, with some interest shown in moving to a new location for a “fresh” start. He identified benefits in meeting new people, and developing more structured work-related activities. He pointed out that bar and other hospitality work were easy to get in other centres, and that a permanent job would help him meet people and take his mind off negative thoughts. Going back through his skills and interests, and career options graphs, he agreed that hospitality work fitted his social nature and interests. There was a discussion around how hospitality could allow him to pursue his interest in surfing by being able to try it in new places.

### Lifestyle

Jason’s responses to the lifestyle section are shown in figure 4.

The lifestyle section showed strong hopes in enjoying life and repeated the desire for a socially oriented life with variety. The discussions centred on the realism of this approach – considering the fears that were indicated in the personal attributes and values section. The discussion turned again toward work-related changes that would make both the lifestyle and personal attributes and values section more realistic. After counselling, Jason could see his interest in changing his life by shifting location and getting a job in the hospitality sector would lead to development and fulfilment of those future selves.

### Summary and conclusion

Jason’s responses to the Future Selves tool revealed a great deal of highly personalised and job-relevant information, only some of which is discussed here. Responses to the tool initially revealed someone with a low work ethic who was content to remain on a benefit for lifestyle reasons, but with some vocational aspirations, which were dependent on their fitting his apparent self-concept.

However, the personal attributes and values section showed considerable underlying distress. This provided a means of challenging Jason’s approach to the world of work. Personal counselling issues reflected his sense of well-being, leisure aspects (to surf in new places) and aspects of his social life (the opportunity for new, fresh friendships). His interest in changing his life by shifting location and getting a job in the hospitality sector lead to development and fulfilment of those more positive future selves.

### Discussion

This case study demonstrates the intense overlapping of career and personal counselling. The traditional staples of career work were needed and were present – identi-

fication of career opportunities and skills and interests. But to address these issues meaningfully a whole host of surrounding issues were also addressed, including the development of thoughts and beliefs that hindered future progress, but helped Jason cope with his present situation.

The ability of the possible selves framework to bring these structures out allowed them to be developed and changed. It also allowed those emotions attached to future states which act as powerful organisers and motivators around future action to be addressed. Furthermore, Jason's underlying career distress was also present and needed the provision of genuine counselling skills – precisely the integration of the career and general counselling skills called for in this article.

It was earlier mentioned that this was achieved relatively quickly. Both career theory and clients are demanding that counsellors do more than test them and tell them, but the amount of time available for most clients is, in practice, limited. The use of a computerised inventory was effective in screening and identifying issues and opportunities very quickly without the need for expensive face-to-face counselling time. It also had the effect of engaging the client, meaning that counsellors could use the scarce counselling time in the most effective manner. This differs from the traditional use of an instrument as a form of assessment – a form of objectification and labelling – and instead helps counsellors work closely but quickly with their clients.

Our position is that this example is representative not in its specific content but in the underlying nature of how emotions, relations with others, context and cognitions come into play. These are the traditional domain of non-career counsellors, but they serve career settings well.

## Conclusion

As the arguments for a more integrative approach to career counselling increase, specific approaches that also acknowledge the constraints often inherent in career counselling contracts can offer a way forward. Possible selves theory is comprehensive and acknowledges the multiple factors that influence career decision-making. Its New Zealand application, Future Selves, provides a broad map from which counsellors, career counsellors and their clients can explore the territory.

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