

Archetypal narratives in career counselling: a chaos theory application

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Abstract This paper seeks to extend previous work on narrative career counselling by considering the role of plot within clients' narratives. Seven archetypal narratives derived from the work of Booker (2004) are introduced that represent systems of meaning to provide insight into how individuals interpret their experience. These plots can be understood within the Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) in terms of the attractors contained within the client narratives. Identifying the plots provides new insights into the nature of career development difficulties and how client stories may be reformulated.

Résumé **Récits archétypaux en conseil en orientation: une application de la théorie du chaos.** Cet article cherche à prolonger les travaux précédents sur le conseil en orientation, qui utilise le récit de vie, en considérant le rôle des espaces de sens dans les récits des clients. On présente sept récits archétypaux dérivés du travail de Booker (2004) qui représentent des systèmes de signification destinés à fournir un éclairage sur la façon dont les individus interprètent leur expérience. Ces espaces peuvent être interprétés dans le cadre de la Théorie du Chaos en Orientation (TCO) en termes d'attracteurs contenus dans les récits du client. L'identification des espaces fournit de nouvelles perspectives quant à la nature des difficultés de développement de la vie professionnelle et quant à la façon dont les histoires narrées par le client peuvent être reformulées.

Zusammenfassung **Archetypische Erzählungen in der Beruflichen Beratung: Eine Anwendung der Chaos-Theorie.** Dieser Artikel versucht, frühere Arbeiten zum Thema der erzählenden Beruflichen Beratung zu erweitern, indem die Bedeutung der Lebensentwürfe in den Erzählungen der Klienten betrachtet wird.

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Sieben archetypische Erzählungen, abgeleitet aus der Arbeit von Brooker (2004) werden vorgestellt, die Bedeutungssysteme repräsentieren und so Einsichten in die Art und Weise ermöglichen, wie Personen ihre Erfahrungen interpretieren. Diese Lebensentwürfe können innerhalb der Chaos-Theorie der Berufswahl (CTC) im Sinne von Attraktoren verstanden werden, die in den Erzählungen der Klienten enthalten sind. Die Lebensentwürfe zu verstehen stellt neue Erkenntnisse darüber zur Verfügung, welcher Art die Schwierigkeiten in Berufsescheidungen sind, und wie die Geschichten der Klienten umgedeutet werden können.

Resumen Narrativas Arquetípicas en Orientación para la Carrera: Una Aplicación de la Teoría del Caos. Este artículo amplía el trabajo previo sobre la narrativa en la orientación para la carrera al considerar el papel de la trama en las narrativas de los clientes. Se introducen siete narrativas arquetípicas, que derivan del trabajo de Booker (2004), y representan sistemas de significado que permiten conocer cómo los individuos interpretan su experiencia. Estas tramas pueden entenderse—dentro de la Teoría del Caos de las Carreras (TCC)—como los elementos atrayentes dentro de las narrativas de los clientes. Al identificar las tramas podemos conocer mejor la naturaleza de las dificultades en el desarrollo de la carrera, y cómo las historias de los clientes pueden ser reformuladas.

Keywords Narratives · Career counselling · Chaos theory

As far as we know telling stories is one of the oldest forms of human communication. Stories form the basis for most art and history. “Careers as stories” has become one of the major metaphors in career development (Inkson, 2007). Narrative approaches and techniques have become widely accepted and used in career development theory and practice (Bujold, 2004; Cochran, 1997; Savickas, 1997). Career construction theory has formed the conceptual basis for much of this work (Brott, 2001; Patton & McMahon, 2006; Savickas, 2005). This approach explores the unique and specific characteristics of individuals’ stories. Each person’s story according to this theory, draws its meaning and uniqueness from the “society’s grand narrative of careers” which contextualizes and acculturates the ways in which stories are formulated and communicated (Savickas, 2005). In this paper an alternative framework is presented for understanding career narratives based on archetypal plots common to all human stories. It is proposed that the Chaos Theory of Careers (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003a, b, 2007a, b) can be employed as a conceptual basis for understanding how stories can be used to assist those seeking career counselling.

Narrative and archetypal plots

Humans endeavour to comprehend their world and themselves. That is to say humans are self conscious. They seek to understand and interpret their experience. They do so by looking for patterns in their experience. Narratives reveal fundamental structures of interpretation of human experience (Amundson, 2003).

They uncover individual frameworks for understanding personal experience. However, while each individual's experience (and therefore narrative) is unique we all have to negotiate a common range of developmental challenges as part of living (Bujold, 2004). If this were not the case then it is difficult to see how narrative endeavours such as art, history, philosophy, spirituality and literature would be meaningful to any one other than the individuals responsible for creating them. Indeed this is explicitly recognized in that the literature in the career development field has drawn upon such materials as bases for counselling including fables (Fergle, 2007), myths (Green & Sharman-Burke, 2000), movies (Pryor & Bright, 2003a) and parables (Pryor & Bright, 2005). The underlying patterning of these stories of common experience as revealed in world literature has been surveyed to reveal seven archetypal plots (Booker, 2004).

Such archetypal plots may not only underlie most if not all the greatest works of the human imagination in the arts and humanities, but may also form the basis of the career narratives of clients seeking career development assistance. This paper suggests that such plots are signposts or compass points for understanding the common patterns of human experience lived out in personal careers. As a consequence such archetypal plots when identified may help both counsellors and their clients to a better understanding of the kinds of stories that individuals are constructing for themselves. This in turn, may help explicate the nature of the career development issues or challenges which have prompted individuals to seek career counselling (Cochran, 1997). Furthermore, this approach may also be a way to identify and generate alternative plots with which the individuals with the assistance of their counsellors, can reconstruct their career stories in ways which suggest new perspectives, opportunities and avenues for action (McMahon, 2007).

Bookers' seven plots

Booker (2004) reviewed a vast amount of world literature and concluded that the stories underlying all of this work spanning over three thousand years could be classified into seven basic plot categories. He illustrates these plots by numerous literary works to show how they are used and varied across many different writers from many different periods of time. Booker (2004) acknowledges that others have attempted similar tasks. His approach was chosen for this paper for the following reasons:

- The survey of sources for stories is very comprehensive including fables, novels, films, poems, traditional tales, the Bible, comic strips, plays, television series, animation, operas, recorded history and mythology. In the index of this publication more than 450 works are cited.
- The survey did not try to be selective in terms of quality defined by arbitrary aesthetic standard—stories are stories whether they are told well or poorly. The survey included everyone from Homer and Mozart to Marilyn Monroe and The Simpsons.
- The survey is grounded in the psychological work of Carl Jung and therefore relates more specifically explanatory accounts in terms of human experience.

- Booker (2004) himself claims his is a new perspective based on "... the recognition that all kinds of story, however profound or however trivial, ultimately spring from the same source, are shaped around the same basic patterns and are governed by the same hidden, universal rules." (p. 13). Such an approach in its emphasis on emergent patterns, is congruent (as will be illustrated in this contribution) with a chaos theory explanation of career development.

Table 1 represents a summary of the basic characteristics of the plots and also contains an induced shorthand theme and some career implications for those using particular plots to describe their own lives and careers. Booker identifies his plots as "archetypal".

Conceptualizing archetypal plots

These archetypal plots may help to identify the kinds of stories individuals tell themselves and construct for ourselves. If so then such archetypal plots represent systems of meaning. Such systems of meaning may be in turn providing insight into how individuals interpret their experience and the degree to which they believe they have control over their circumstances. Within the Chaos Theory of Careers systems of meaning are incorporated into the concept of the "attractors" (Pryor & Bright, 2007b). According to the Chaos Theory of Careers most if not all, career development problems can be understood as ways of dealing with complexity (Pryor, Amundson, & Bright, 2007).

The Chaos Theory of Careers

The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) conceptualizes individuals and the dimensions of their careers in terms of complex dynamical systems (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003b, 2007a). This approach to the understanding of career development is holistic in the belief that aspects of reality can only ultimately be comprehended when they are considered in the entirety of their contexts with other systems of which they are apart. Such systems as a result of their complex interdependence of components are dynamical in the sense that they are sensitive to change and such change has the capacity to be non-linear (that is, the effect on the system may be disproportionate to the original change input). These systems also evidence emergent qualities as a consequence of the connectedness of their components. Indeed the theory suggests that career itself is an emergent property from the chaotic interaction of individuals with the rest of their contexts (Pryor & Bright, 2007b).

Complex dynamical systems therefore are both stable and unstable at the same time. They hover between states of complete rigidity and total fluidity. Water is an example which is between the rigidity of ice and the fluidity of steam. However, as a result of their susceptibility to change chaotic systems may on occasions, transform either slowly and progressively, through adaptation to their environment or

Table 1 Summary of Booker's seven plots

| Plot & Theme & Career implications | Stages |
|--|--|
| Plot: Overcoming the monster Theme: Tackling a major power or fear Career implications: facing challenges; confronting fears; taking risks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipation: becoming aware of the monster • Dream: making preparations for battle • Frustration: slipping into the monster's power • Nightmare: the climactic ordeal • Thrilling escape and death of monster by miraculous fatal blow |
| Plot: Rags to riches Theme: From darkness to light Career implications: seizing opportunity; realizing potential | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial wretchedness (the Call) • Out into the world • The central crisis • Independence and final ordeal • Final union, completion, fulfilment |
| Plot: Quest Theme: Seeking a better life Career implications: purpose, achievement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Call: setting something right • The Journey: setting out across hostile terrain • Arrival & Frustration: within sight of goal new obstacles emerge • Final Ordeals: a last series of tests • Goal: life transformation is won |
| Plot: Voyage & return Theme: Learning from challenges Career implications: adventure, recovery, exploration & discovery, open-mindedness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipation: naïve to future challenge, then catapulted into the new challenge • Fascination: new puzzle puzzling or exhilarating • Frustration: adventure turns darker • Nightmare: real threat to hero • Thrilling escape back to original world with new learning and experience |
| Plot: Comedy Theme: From misapprehension to apprehensive Career implications: dissonance to harmony | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World of confusion with people shut off from one another • Confusion gets worse until everyone is in a nightmarish tangle • Unrecognized things now dramatically change perceptions and light & harmony is brought to the world |
| Plot: Tragedy Theme: Vulnerability and demise Career implications: Victim mentality, over-estimation of control, hubris | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipation: hero is incomplete • Dream: commits to a course of action • Frustration: things begin to wrong • Nightmare: things slipping seriously out of control • Destruction: precipitates own demise |

Table 1 continued

| Plot & Theme & Career implications | Stages |
|---|---|
| Plot: Rebirth Theme: Triumph through travail and trial Career implications: Hope, insight, change, wisdom | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hero falls under shadow of Dark Power • All seems to go well for a while • Power returns and hero in a state of living death • Seems as though Dark Power has triumphed • Miraculous redemption by another force (hero, heroine or child) |

dramatically and comprehensively through phase shift (Morowitz, 2002). Contingency is the inevitable result of this type of complexity and chaos theory serves to provide a conceptually coherent account of the role of unplanned events in individuals' experiences and careers. The multitude of influences in such systems and the multiple variations of their interactions along with the typically wide range of connections with other external systems make predicting outcomes within chaotic systems in any detailed sense doubtful although it is possible to see emerging patterns over time. The weather is the classic example of this exemplar of limited specific prediction along with overall discernible patterns of seasons and climates (Lorenz, 1993). The Chaos Theory of Careers (Pryor & Bright, 2007a) drawing on the delineations of chaotic systems from other sciences, identifies four descriptions of how such systems function. These are designated as "attractors" since they describe patterns of functioning that are bounded by influences which operate in ways analogous to orbiting planets.

Attractors

Bright and Pryor provided extensive technical explanations of the four chaos attractors in other publications (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003a, 2007a). Within the framework of this paper the descriptions of the four chaos attractors are limited to an outline which could form the basis of an explanation to career counselling clients. The world is complex and composed of interconnected systems. Many aspects of reality interconnect and constitute systems. We encounter systems everyday and our own bodies are composed of various systems. In chaos theory, the way a system functions is called that system's attractor. In career terms, attractors are representations of how people think, feel and act when confronting issues of career decision making and development.

Point attractor

The first (there is no particular significance to the order) is the point (or goal attractor). A metaphor for this attractor is a guided missile tracking to a target. The focus is exclusively on the target—everything else is a distraction to be ignored or an obstacle to be overcome. All that really matters is hitting the target. Goal—

driven individuals tend to act this way. They feel compelled to succeed. Nothing and no one will keep them from fulfilling their aspirations. Such individuals often exhibit determination, concentration, single-mindedness, commitment, dedication and willingness to sacrifice.

Pendulum attractor

The second attractor is called the pendulum (or role attractor). A metaphor for this attractor is someone taking their first parachute jump. As they approach the open door of the plane to jump the excitement declines and the fear becomes stronger. They draw back and head for a seat and then the fear subsides and they start to feel cowardly so they get up and move toward the door again. They oscillate back and forth between conflicting feelings, ideas and actions. In career terms, this attractor may be evident in the conflicting priorities of an individual's work and non-work life, or in ambivalence about whether to continue in a job they only partially like or leave and take the risk of the next job being worse than the one they have.

Torus attractor

The third attractor is called the torus (or routine) attractor. A metaphor for this attractor is a city train on an underground station circuit. The route can be quite long with many twists and turns but the train goes the same way each time around and is organized around a time schedule. Everything is planned out. Order and control are what matter. Many people try to live their lives this way. They plan ahead. They categorize everything (and often everybody). They organize and schedule so that they can know what will happen next and can feel "at the helm" of their lives and their careers. Such individuals usually crave structure, routine, order and predictability. They manage their careers in the traditional way of planning, organizing and controlling.

Strange attractor

The fourth attractor is called the strange (or complexity) attractor. A metaphor for this attractor is the weather. The weather is a globally complex and variable system. There are discernible patterns in terms of climates across regions and seasons within regions. However, while these are generically predictable they are specifically unpredictable. In career terms this attractor is the recognition of both the value and the limitations of individuals' endeavours to gain knowledge and to obtain control of their working lives. The strange attractor is a vision of reality in which stability and change, being and becoming, planning and happenstance, order and chance are not opposing forces but the dyadic constituents of the one whole, like two sides of the one coin. It is the interplay between order and disorder that is the essence of being alive. Individuals can make plans, be proactive, train, decide and commit in their career development. However the inescapable reality of complexity is that we can never know everything that could be relevant and we can never control all of the

Table 2 A comparison of closed and open systems thinking

| Closed systems thinking | Open systems thinking |
|--|---|
| The unexpected should/will not happen | The unexpected can/sometimes will happen |
| “I am invincible” | “I am vulnerable, sometimes” |
| High risk taking without backup strategy | Risk taking with a backup strategy |
| “Life should be fair” | “Life has no guarantees” |
| A strong sense of personal control | A recognition of human limitation |
| Disregard of contingency | Contingency planning |
| Confidence in order and the past | Acknowledge the reality of phase shifts |
| Linearity of change | Non-linearity of change |
| Exceptions are errors—disregard | Exceptions can be determinative & significant |
| Limited inputs to respond to change | Creativity in response to change |

influences that could potentially impact on our decisions and more generally on our lives.

Closed and open systems thinking

Life is uncertain. This is both one of humankind’s greatest challenges and greatest opportunities. Negatively the uncertainty of life impacts through tragedy, accident, grief, loss, disappointment, pain suffering and anguish that were neither expected nor sought. Such uncertainties are challenges to adapt, to be resilient and to be courageous. Positively the uncertainty of life presents opportunities to be creative, to construct lives and careers and to find meaning and fulfilment. This is what it is to live on the edge of chaos (Pryor & Bright, 2004). Ultimately it is only the strange attractor that constitutes the most realistic and essentially most practical response to being alive. The other attractors are fundamentally closed systems conceptions of reality and careers. They may work well in the short-term but at some juncture and at some time the complexity of reality intrudes exposing the limitations of human knowledge and control. Put simply our lives are open systems despite our best efforts to secure control over them. As a consequence to negotiate effectively the challenges of complexity in human experience, individuals must adopt open systems thinking (Bright & Pryor, 2005). Table 2 summarizes some of the most salient differences between closed and open systems thinking.

Attractors and archetypal plots

Butz (1997) noted that most maladaptive behaviour in a clinical context derives from a struggle between attractors. In career development the challenges of complexity—uncertainty, change and overload—are often dealt with by using an inappropriate attractor. What individuals often attempt to do is to use “closed systems thinking” (attractors) to deal with an open systems reality. Fundamentally

reality is a strange attractor (an open system) whereas individuals frequently (and with varying levels of success) utilize the other three attractors in their attempts to live their lives and develop their careers.

The point attractor is an attempt to deal with reality by single-minded, dedication to goals and outcomes as though by dint of will, ability and effort a person can control all the circumstances and outcomes of one's life. The pendulum attractor is an attempt to deal with reality by dichotomizing efforts and energies, setting up roles or oscillating between courses of action. The torus attractor is an attempt to deal with reality by organizing, classifying, managing and systematizing everything. While these three attractors can be effective in producing positive outcomes in some aspects of our experience (Pryor & Bright, 2007a) ultimately the complexity of reality will break through all the best efforts to deny it.

When unplanned changes occur in people's lives they often do not have the strategies to adapt to, utilize and overcome such changes. The "old" way of thinking and acting (the closed system attractor) will not work any more and they have no new ways to respond. The plot of their story locks them into ways of thinking and acting which may result in career floundering, distress, disorientation and desperation. While the seven archetypal plots cannot be directly equated with any one of the attractors, identifying the plots underlying individuals' stories and the attractors they represent, provides new insights into the nature of such counselling clients' difficulties. In addition, these insights can also provide alternative strategies for choosing new stories which will orient the person toward open systems thinking and away from unrealistic expectations about human knowledge and control.

In summary, the archetypal plots in conjunction with the attractors can be used in career counselling in three ways:

1. To help people to become "unstuck" (Amundson, 2003) in their thinking about their careers by presenting new perspectives (i.e. different plots) by which to understand their experience and in this process to generate new strategies for further career motivation and action;
2. To alter individuals expectations about complexity and its career development implications. The realities that we too often ignore or refuse to face are that change can be unpredictable, that we nearly always have make decisions without complete knowledge of the situation and that we can never be entirely confident of the consequences of our actions (Pryor & Bright, 2006);
3. To utilize the uncertainty of a complex future by developing ways to recognize and to generate positive opportunities for career development through "luck readiness" (Neault, 2002; Pryor & Bright, 2005) and the consideration of possibilities and probabilities (Pryor et al., 2007).

A brief illustrative case study example

Please note that the following are summarized vignettes with only those aspects relevant to the aims of this paper outlined. In this sense the complexity of individuals' career experiences have been simplified for illustrative purposes.

Max's story

Max outlined the story of his career as an attempt to escape the poverty and disadvantage of his childhood by a single-minded endeavour to study information technology while working as a labourer and later as an IT client support worker. Being the eldest child, he had to leave school early to support his ailing sole parent mother and his other siblings. It had been a hard grind for him with limited education and such responsibilities, to develop a career in the computer industry. He had studied hard, sacrificed relationships and family opportunities “to escape the cycle of poverty” in which he saw so many of those with whom he grew up. He had seen computers as his means to become wealthy and free from money worries. Just when he thought he had “made it” the large organization for which he had worked for last seven years relocated to another state and Max could not abandon his obligations to his struggling family members some of whom were ill, doing drugs or in trouble with the law. There were no other organizations in his county in which he could find the particular IT work he had been doing for the last three years. Max felt devastated and depressed. All his efforts and sacrifices seemed to have come to nothing—it looked like he was going to have to return to low-paid unskilled work again.

Max's career counsellor suggested to him that he was telling himself a “Rags to Riches” story and that the problem was that the riches never seemed to finally arrive. Moreover Max's single-minded discipline and sacrifice, though admirable and useful, were indicative of goal-fixed thinking and action (that is, the point attractor). As a result he had been inflexibly blinkered and overestimated his ability to control his life and career.

After reviewing the other archetypal plots together, Max and his counsellor decided to recast his story in terms of “Rebirth”. This led Max to start exploring to seek out another source of assistance to “redeem” his situation. He began to think more laterally about his career in IT and focused less on trying to do everything himself and instead by networking to open up new possibilities. Through some informal contacts in his former employing company he was offered computerized graphic design work by a publisher in the same state but in a different county. Max was then able to work from home for most of the week and go to the new company's office for a limited time. This allowed him to continue to support other members of his family and at the same time to develop his career in a new direction. Max had begun to appreciate the limitations of his efforts on the one hand and the possibilities of a future which could be crafted on the other. That is, he was telling himself a new story now and he was beginning to acknowledge his “strange attractor”. He had moved away from the restrictions of closed systems thinking towards open systems thinking. Of course all this continues to be dynamic and so Max may find in the future that his current narrative may “degenerate” toward closed systems thinking as change and complexity continue to impact his life. At such a point he may need (with or without the assistance of a career counsellor) to identify a new plot as a basis for a more adaptable narrative of his experience in the future. In chaos theory stability and change are not opposites but integral components of any system as whole—being and becoming can never be separated (Pryor, 2007).

Conclusion

The inescapable complexity of reality presents challenges many career development clients find difficult to deal with. Individuals are often threatened by change and uncertainty along with the concomitant limitations that they expose about our powers of knowledge and control. In order to avoid such “inconvenient truths” individuals will develop narratives of their careers based on attractors which appear to overcome these challenges (Pryor & Bright, 2007a). They think that if they can just goal set well enough (point attractor) or balance competing roles effectively enough (pendulum attractor) or classify and organize efficiently enough (torus attractor) then they will achieve control, predictability and freedom from the vicissitudes of life. However, while such attempts may succeed in the short-term at some time the inadequacy of such strategies will eventually manifest itself. Reality as humans experience it is an open system. Ultimate control may be a divine prerogative but it is not granted to humans. Most people existentially find this a truth hard to live with. They will struggle against it or they repress it or they determine that though it may be true for others it will not be for them; through the self stories they construct or adopt.

These narratives people tell themselves and identify with have manifestly common characteristics as illustrated by Booker (2004), which constitute archetypal plots. These plots enable counsellors to identify common patterns of thinking and responding to the challenges of complexity as they are experienced in career development. Attractors enable counsellors to understand if these underlying plots are being used as closed or open systems thinking formulations of the issues and responses. If the archetypal plot is being used in a closed system way then reconstructing their stories based on alternative plots, may help the individuals to develop new perspectives about their careers and more open systems thinking about the perpetual challenges of, and opportunities derived from, uncertainty, chance and change.

The Chaos Theory of Careers is however, not specifically bound to narrative approaches to career counselling. Similarly the current trend among constructivist theorists to repudiate quantitative approaches such as psychometric assessment is a view with which the current authors trenchantly disagree (Bright & Pryor, 2007). Complexity requires multiple perspectives and narratives incorporating archetypal plots are one such perspective. Moreover, the narrative approach itself has an inherent weakness. By encouraging individuals to tell their stories, counsellors are suggesting implicitly that clients should formulate a coherent, linear, cause and effort account which is likely to underestimate the influences of happenstance and randomness. In this way, stories may blind us to the challenges of uncertainty. Stories have a tendency to tie up the loose ends of reality in a way which amounts to an oversimplification of complexity. This is a limitation of narrative that is rarely recognized. However, this does not invalidate its use but it merely illustrates that narrative shares this limitation of complexity oversimplification in common with all other career counselling techniques.

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