

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

# Applying the principles and techniques of solution-focused therapy to career counselling

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### Abstract

Career counselling aims to help clients become more effective agents in solving problems in their vocational aspects of life. To achieve this goal, theorists and practitioners are called upon to form useful helping approaches that can help clients in a more efficient and effective manner. This article proposes an alternative model toward this end by considering and adopting principles and techniques from the solution-focused therapy in career counselling practice. After a very brief introduction of the basic features of the solution-focused counselling, the paper reviews some key theoretical principles of the solution-focused therapy, and connects these principles to career counselling context. It then illustrates several solution-focused counselling techniques that are particularly applicable to career counselling intervention.

**Keywords:** *Solution-focused therapy, career counselling, career development theories, effective problem solving, integrating counselling approaches*

### Introduction

The ultimate purpose of career counselling is about helping clients become more effective agents in solving problems in their vocational aspects of life. The theoretical roots of problem solving can be traced back to a century ago when Frank Parsons (1909) contributed his pioneering theoretical premises to career development and counselling – known as vocational guidance at the time. According to Parsons (1909), vocational problem solving is best achieved through a rational reasoning between knowing one's self-related traits and the demands of the world of work. This very same ideology has guided the career development practice and vocational guidance for the past 100 years. Notwithstanding the

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emergence of various new schools of thinking in theory and practice (Brown, 2002; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002), the essence of problem solving has continued to show its vitality in vocational and career psychology. For example, to solve the possible unfit and conflicts in the workplace, individuals have to find three possible solutions. They make themselves adjust to the working environment, and vice versa, they make the working environment more agreeable to their personal needs. They can also have the last solution to leave this particular working environment (Dawis, 2002). This work adjustment process is obviously solution-focused. Also, problem solving can be achieved either through obtaining social learning experience (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996), or enhancing one's cognitive information processing skills (Peterson, Sampson, Reardon, & Lenz, 2002).

Career problem solving calls upon vocational theorists and practitioners to be open-minded and creative in generating useful helping approaches that can help clients in a more efficient and effective manner. One way of working toward this goal is to consider and adopt principles and techniques from the solution-focused therapy (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993) in career counselling. This article attempts to explore the applicability of the solution-focused theoretical frame to career counselling. It argues that with a positive orientation and focus on helping clients in a minimum amount of time, the solution-focused therapy can offer an alternative useful model for career counselling intervention. Following this intent, this paper will: (1) introduce very briefly the background and basic features of the solution-focused counselling, (2) review key theoretical principles of the solution-focused therapy, and connect these principles to career counselling context, and (3) illustrate several solution-focused counselling techniques that are particularly applicable to career counselling intervention.

## **The basics of solution-focused counselling**

### *Brief therapy: Foundation of solution-focused counselling*

Solution-focused counselling is a type of brief counselling. Brief counselling has gained great popularity in the last 40 years, due mainly to the fact that it is centrally concerned with efficiency and economy (Davis & Osborn, 2000). This time-focused aspect of brief counselling is but one component of the approach, however. Brief counselling is perhaps better defined as "conceptually planned" counselling, as at its core is its intentional and purposeful therapeutic process (Davis & Osborn, 2000). Koss, Butcher, and Strupp (1986) suggested that brief counselling can be most fully defined by the following nine attributes. First, time is limited. Second, goals for counselling are limited. Third, a strong working alliance is developed. Fourth, the focus of counselling is maintained throughout the process. Fifth, there is a high level of counsellor activity. Sixth, the counsellor remains flexible. Seventh, interventions are introduced promptly. Eighth, assessments are conducted early and rapidly. Ninth, clients are encouraged to express their feelings.

Culley and Wright (1997) offer a shorter definition of brief counselling and state that it is “a pragmatic approach which focuses on problem solution or management by the most efficient route. Brief counselling does not espouse the notion of ‘cure’ or have character change as one of its goals” (p. 254). Research has shown that brief counselling offers several advantages over traditional interventions. First, it is more in line with what clients want and expect, particularly in regards to the number of sessions. Second, results of brief counselling compare favourably with longer-term interventions. Third, proposing no notion of an “ideal” emotional state” that clients should achieve before they can be said to no longer need counselling, it does away with the notions of healing and termination. Fourth, unlike traditional counselling philosophies, brief counselling does not see the client as fundamentally deficient. In other words, the clients is not cast “as the problem”, but rather is simply in the problem or under its influence (Milner & O’Byrne, 2002).

#### *Solution-focused counselling: Main frame and basic features*

Solution-focused counselling is one form of brief counselling and is rooted in the work of hypnotherapist Milton Erickson and family systems therapy (Murphy, 1996). Solution-focused counselling was conceived and developed by DeShazer and his colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the 1980s (DeShazer, 1985, 1988, 1990). The foundation of this approach is the fundamental belief that people have what it takes to get what they want, and that this potential simply needs to be brought into their consciousness and set in motion (Milner & O’Byrne, 2002). Solution-focused counselling is also known as a non-pathological approach, in that the counsellor forms no preconceived notion about the nature of the problem and does not seek to understand the cause of the problem. In other words, the focus of the counselling is on where the client wants to go, rather than on where they have been. In order for this to happen, the counsellor takes on a curious, “unknowing” stance with the client, letting him or her become the expert on the presenting problem (Sharry, Darmody, & Madden, 2002). Because of these attributes, solution-focused counselling has drawn great attention from counsellors who seek a time-sensitive, positive, and highly pragmatic approach to working with their clients (Murphy, 1996).

### **Applying solution-focused approach in career counselling**

#### *Connecting solution-focused principles to career counselling*

Berg and Miller (1992) noted that there are eight central principles associated with solution-focused counselling. In addition, Davis and Osborn (2000) propose another five principles that constitute the main frame of this therapeutic approach. A very brief review of these principles is necessary to understand the essence of this therapy, because these principles capture the goals and their related intervention strategies of this therapeutic alternative. Of particular note,

these very principles seem to provide some viable options when they are connected to, and conceptualized in a career counselling context. Career counsellors may find these principles useful in helping clients cope with various issues in their worklife in general, and in their career planning and decision making in particular.

#### *Focusing on positive change*

The emphasis of solution-focused counselling is on mental health, and the belief that positive change is possible. Solution-focused counsellors do not seek the cause of problems. Instead, they believe that it is more important to focus on understanding the seeds of solutions that are usually in the client's story (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002). Similarly, Davis and Osborn (2000) note that in solution-focused counselling, solutions for problems are constructed from current and accessible resources rather than discovered during archaeological excavations of the client's past. To put this into a career counselling context, this means, for example, that spending time figuring out why Heather is afraid of speaking to her students' parents and wants to leave her position as an elementary school teacher is not necessary. Instead, the focus of career counselling with Heather would be towards the future, and on helping her to find alternate work that would cause her less anxiety.

#### *Focusing on resources*

Emphasis is placed on the client's resources and strengths, rather than on his/her limitations and deficiencies. Thus, solution-focused counsellors assist their clients to think not about their problems, but about their strengths and possible solutions. Solutions to the presenting problem are constructed using a client's own resources that can include: (a) exceptions to the dysfunctional or unsuccessful behavior, (b) past successes; and (c) the client's ability to imagine a future when the problem no longer exists (Davis & Osborn, 2000). This orientation towards competency differs markedly from the deficit-based perspective that is prevalent in many vocational counselling contexts. For example, there is a common belief that clients referred for career or employment counselling services are somehow lacking in the necessary skills required to get a job on their own. Solution-focused counsellors, on the other hand, view their clients as "stuck" versus "sick" (Murphy, 1996). With this more positive and forward-looking perspective, the counsellor facilitates and encourages the client to mobilize his/her personal resources and potential in finding a solution and solving a career problem.

#### *Client as the expert*

The client, but not the counsellor, is the expert regarding his or her own circumstances and potential solutions. In other words, counsellors are not the experts about what their clients need (Davis & Osborn, 2000). Rather, "client and therapist work together cooperatively, with the client functioning as the expert

in her treatment and defining the goal of therapy.” (McFarland, 1995, p. 35). Milner and O’Byrne (2002) emphasize the benefits of letting clients be the experts of their own solutions in life. As a result, we as counsellors come to realize the reality that “we enjoy the freedom from worry that our surrender of expertise leads to – we don’t know ‘truths’ about people’s lives and it is great no longer to believe that we must know. This means that we are not burnt out with the burden of expertise” (p. 175).

In order for a client to see him or herself as the expert, solution-focused counselling always begins where the client is, and the counsellor takes or accepts what the client has to say at face value. In addition, the client’s needs or wishes are kept central throughout the counselling process and the procedures used are tailored specifically to that particular client (Davis & Osborn, 2000). A solution-focused counsellor “adopts an ‘alien’ or ‘travel agent’ perspective, viewing the client as the guide to his own world, as the one who teaches the counsellor about his worldview and beliefs, perceptions of the problem and solution, and so on. In effect, the counsellor is saying ‘help me understand who you are, what you want (your goals), and what will help you get it (interventions). This approach immediately positions the client in an active leadership role in the process, laying the foundation for his ownership of the desired changes” (Murphy, 1996, p. 187).

One aspect of career counselling that can perpetuate the notion of the career counsellor as “the expert”, rather than the client, is the use of career assessments. The utilization of the psychological testing tools naturally allows the client to assume that it is all right to be “told what to do”. To reverse this thought process, and to place the role of expert back onto the client, the counsellor can avoid using these standardized psychometric tools as the sole measurement for vocational assessment. When the use of testing tools is needed, the counsellor could invite the client to be an active participant in the interpretation of the testing results, deriving meanings from the client’s perspective in forming the assessment report.

#### *Selecting the most relevant intervention*

Counselling is parsimonious, or economical, in that the least interfering and the most relevant and accessible interventions are selected first. Once this intervention is selected, it is implemented in the shortest time frame possible. In other words, simplicity is the rule of thumb for solution-focused counselling, and once again, the counsellor does not devote time to uncovering meticulous details of the difficulty presented by the client (Davis & Osborn, 2000). Similarly, solution-focused counselling holds that a small change in any aspect of the problem can initiate a solution. This assumption is “based on the systemic, ecological notion that a small change in any part of a system can ripple into larger changes” (Murphy, 1996, p. 185). Under this school of thought, even “big problems” do not necessarily require long and complicated solutions.

In adapting these notions to career counselling context, we as counsellors may find that our clients do not require as extensive assistance as we are currently giving them. Many employment-related programs for social assistance recipients,

for example, are several weeks in length. Noting that even small changes can have a profound effect on the client, vocational practitioners of such programs may be well advised to shorten their programs by focusing specifically on what the client identifies as his or her problem. This problem would then be addressed by assisting the client to access his or her own strengths and resources to come up with a proposed solution to the problem.

#### *Change as the unavoidable outcome*

Change, particularly positive change, is considered inevitable. The expectation that positive transformation can and does occur is one of the central presuppositions of solution-focused counselling (DeShazer, 1988). Solutions are made possible because change is ongoing. Problems are simply reframed as short-term disturbances, rather than as pervasive and never-ending impediments (Davis & Osborn, 2000). For this reason, solution-focused counselling has been characterized as the “counselling of hope” (Milner & O’Byrne, 2002). Perceiving that change *will* come about can bring hope to career and employment counsellors who work with the long-term unemployed. Often with multiple barriers, these clients are considered difficult to work with, and could no doubt benefit from a counsellor who takes on the perspective that unemployment is merely a short-term difficulty, and not an irreversible state. More importantly, the counsellor communicates this sense of hope to the client through the brief helping process that focuses on generating positive solution.

#### *Future orientation*

To help clients find meaningful solutions to problems in life, counselling retains a present and future orientation. This means that solution-focused counsellors acknowledge clients for who they are at the present moment, and for who they are becoming, but not for where they have been in the past (Davis & Osborn, 2000). This is very similar in notion to the solution-focused propositions presented previously, holding that counselling is non-pathological, and counselling should focus on the client’s strengths and abilities, rather than their deficits. This present and future tense appears to be particularly advisable to career development and counselling intervention. Although past events and experiences are well recognized and examined in the counselling process, the rationale for career counselling is to form viable visions and strategies for present and future career projects. Drawing attention to the present problems and future plans, the counsellor can help the client find better solutions and options that will enhance the client’s vocational well being.

#### *Building a collaborative alliance*

Solution-focused counselling insists that the counsellor and the client work best in a cooperative and collaborative manner. In order to establish this style of working together, it is important that a positive rapport and a therapeutic alliance be established in the first meeting (Davis & Osborn, 2000). McFarland (1995)

believes that the first session in solution-focused counselling is actually the most critical, as it sets the tone for every subsequent session. Milner and O'Byrne (2002) outline a number of tasks that can be done in the first counselling session to develop a strong rapport between client and counsellor. They suggest that the counselling process be made transparent so as to let clients know that they have control over events and can make their own decisions and choices.

The first step that can be taken involves introducing the counselling process so that it can be demystified. For example, clients can be asked what expectations they have of counselling, and what they hope to achieve through counselling. Second, counsellors can emphasize their view that their client's opinions and ideas are important by asking the client to speak up if he or she feels not being understood. Third, the counsellor can invite the client to leave earlier or take a break from the regular one-hour session. Fourth, clients can be informed at the end of their session that they have several choices, including making another counselling appointment, changing to another counsellor, or deciding to terminate counselling at that time. Lastly, at the end of the first session, the client can be asked for his/her feedback on the session, stating whether and what they found to be helpful for them. It is easy to see how each of these techniques serves to empower the clients, rather than taking away their authority over their own problems.

Forming a collaborative counsellor-client work alliance is a key condition for a healthy and productive career counselling intervention. A common misperception about career counselling is that the rapport between the counsellor and the client is not as important as that of a therapeutic intervention, because career counselling is to help the client to find a job. One of the main factors that reinforces such a misunderstanding is often the time constraint placed on career counselling. Unlike psychotherapy and many other forms of personal and social counselling, very often career counselling is a time-pressed intervention that aims to yield immediate result such as making a decision that will lead to present career change. The counsellor-client work alliance principle and its associated strategies from the solution-focused counselling can fit very well to career counselling context. To adopt these strategies, career counselling can make the building of the work alliance as the very same process that produces concrete and observable result for positive change. A collaborative work alliance will influence the formation of viable solutions to the client's career well being, and vice versa, the more positive career solutions enhance an more effective counsellor-client work relationship.

### *Being pragmatic and flexible*

A central philosophy of solution-focused counselling is being pragmatic and flexible in problem solving. It focuses on what works, while ignoring what does not work. This premise holds that: (a) if it ain't broke, don't fix it, (b) once you know what works, do more of it, and (c) if it doesn't work, don't do it again, and do something different (Berg & Miller, 1992). Though rather informally stated,

the importance of these three points to the philosophy of solution-focused counselling is high. McFarland (1995) expands each of these points, stating first that the counsellor should be concerned only with what the client actively presents as the problem (and not what the counsellor believes is the problem). Second, she states that when the therapist and the client discover a time or times when the problem is not occurring, then a solution has probably been discovered and the client needs to do more of it. Third, she states that if something does not work, it is to be rigorously avoided by the therapist. DeShazer (1990) also emphasizes this point, stating “just about anything that is different stands a chance of making a difference” (p. 94).

This pragmatic and flexible helping philosophy is certainly very helpful to many career counselling interventions that deal with complex and dynamic challenges in the current labor market. Career counselling should foster a sense of long term planning. In the meanwhile, it is equally important that career counselling should help the client adopt more effective and efficient ways of solving some career problems in the immediate future. A more desirable outcome of a career counselling is to link these workable “here-and-now” solutions to the building of a viable long-term plan. Along with the continuous small yet effective steps (i.e., what works for a positive result), the client accumulates valuable learning experiences that will point to a more successful career direction in the long run.

#### *Attention to solution*

Problems are not solved in solution-focused counselling, rather solutions are constructed. Solutions are seen as the opposite of problems and are viewed as the substance of positive change (Davis & Osborn, 2000). Solutions are invented and constructed jointly by the client and the counsellor. In using this unique perspective, career counselling can devote its attention to developing solutions rather concentrating on a career problem itself. This is by no means to minimize the importance of problem-solving, yet to propose a more creative way for problem solving. The counsellor can help the client form alternatives that will render productive action. Once the solution generates more desirable changes in the client’s worklife, the negativity caused by the problems will decrease, and eventually many of these problems may no longer act as problems, leading to the virtual disappearance of the problems.

#### *Exceptions to problem*

Exceptions to problems form the building blocks of solutions. The idea of exceptions is at the crux of solution-focused counselling (Davis & Osborn, 2000). Exceptions are circumstances in which the stated problem: (1) does not occur; (2) occurs less often or intensely; or (3) is in some way different from its regular state (Murphy, 1996). To discover these exceptions, the solution-focused counsellor asks questions such as “when is the problem not occurring?” or “what is going well in your life now?” DeShazer (1985) maintained that through such questioning, clients can discover their own alternatives to problem areas.

The notion of “exceptions” may be utilized as a useful concept to help clients reframe their thinking in career counselling situations. In doing so, the career counsellor helps the client gain insight on a range of issues. First, one’s perspective change can affect the content of a career problem. Thus, an increased awareness on one’s perspective and a flexible attitude to change one’s perspective or to adopt new perspective can be influential to the construction of solutions to a career problem. Second, because of complex environmental and personal influences, a career problem is very often not static, but a dynamic and changing variable. Understanding this changing context, and utilizing it will be a necessity in identifying a career problem.

### *Goal orientation*

Solution-focused counselling is goal-oriented. Solution-focused counsellors work closely with their clients in the construction of goals, but they do not have the power to modify or change the goal – even if they feel the goal is not relevant (Powers, 1996). Goals are the constructed solutions to the presenting problem. Walter and Peller (1992) suggested that there are several assumptions that can be made with regards to solution construction: (1) there are solutions, (2) there is more than one solution, (3) solutions are constructable, (4) the therapist and client do the constructing, and (5) solutions are constructed or invented rather than discovered. There is no doubt that career counselling shares the same general priority about goal-setting in the counselling process. While not necessarily all goal-related assumptions proposed by solution-focused counselling may be applicable to career counselling, three points are definitely worthy of consideration. First, career counselling is goal-oriented, and helping clients set goals is part of the essential task of career counselling. Second, the career counsellor and the client work together to construct obtainable goals. Third, goals for career planning can remain flexible, and there can be several goals that will facilitate more than one solution to a career problem.

### *Constructivist propensity*

Solution-focused counselling is influenced by post-structuralist or constructivist thought. While structuralists seek out the causes and meanings of underlying problems, constructivists prefer to stay on the surface (Milner & O’Byrne, 2002). In essence, a constructivist orientation in solution-focused counselling assumes that there is not a hidden truth or reality to uncover during the course of counselling. That is, the counsellor does not act as an investigator or spy to unearth an already-existing objective reality lying dormant within the client. Rather, the client and counsellor work together, in a cooperative and egalitarian fashion, to create reality and construct meaning that will lead to solutions in the client’s life experience and situations (Davis & Osborn, 2000).

This constructivist view on counselling is echoed strongly by the newly emerging post-modern theoretical approaches in vocational and career psychology (Chen, 2003; Sharf, 2002). The social constructivist theories in

career development and career counselling have proposed parallel arguments in the last two decades, suggesting very similar theoretical and clinical positions as those illustrated by solution-focused counselling. Thus, both counselling approaches, i.e., solution-focused counselling and career counselling, share a vast common ground in this regard.

### *Brief intervention*

The duration of counselling is brief or short-term. Solution-focused counsellors are intentional about time, which means that the natural time limitations that are a part of counselling work are respected. This time-efficient therapeutic frame is certainly very pertinent to career counselling in the current world of work. Along with the swift changes of the labour market caused by various political, social, economic, cultural, demographic, and technological forces, career change has become such a common phenomenon that most workers have to encounter it voluntarily or involuntarily. As a result, various complex and dynamic worklife issues emerge in a time-pressed manner, and they require timely responses and solutions. The career intervention with a time constraint pushes both the counsellor and the client to work toward solutions with higher effectiveness and efficiency. This trend, in turn, stimulates action implementation in career planning, decision making, and problem solving.

### *Utilizing solution-focused interventions in career counselling*

The foregoing discussion has been helpful. In connecting the key principles of the solution-focused counselling to career counselling, the discussion has provided a grounded rationale for the two counselling approaches to integrate, rendering a series of theoretical considerations that aim to enhance the career counselling practice in the current world of work. With such a conceptual foundation, this part of the discussion will illustrate the technical possibility for the two approaches to join hands in a career counselling context. Below are four techniques that are commonly used by solution-focused counsellors. Each technique is explained, and an example is provided to show how this technique might be useful in a career counselling situation.

### *Scaling questions*

Scaling questions are simple and straightforward and can be used for several different purposes, including to measure progress, to search for exceptions, to explore future steps, or to assess motivation and/or willingness to take action. An example of a scaling question is, “on a scale from one to ten, where one is the worst this has ever been, and ten is the best things could ever be, where are things today?” (Powers, 1996). Scaling questions gently push the client to become more and more specific about the next step in his/her solution. For example, the counsellor might say, “so you feel like you have been stuck at around two for a very long time, and it has been very difficult to pull yourself up to two. But I am

also wondering what would be a small sign that you are moving in the right direction?" (Powers, 1996).

The following example demonstrates how scaling questions might be used in a career counselling context. Tracey works in a retirement home and has been struggling with her relationship with her boss. She and her supervisor have constant disagreements and Tracey feels that he has no idea how hard she works and how much skill she brings to her job. On a scale of one to ten, with one being the worst possible relationship a person could have with their boss, and ten being the best possible relationship, Tracey rated her relationship with her boss at a four. The counsellor, seeking to find out what might improve the problem, asks the client: "What would be different if your relationship was at a five instead of a four?" The client responds that she would have less contact with her boss, who shares the same workspace with her. Recognizing the importance of this and its potential impact on her level of job satisfaction, Tracey writes a proposal for her boss, suggesting how having her own office space would allow her to be more productive.

### *Compliments*

DeShazer (1988) noted that the use of compliments in solution-focused counselling is an important therapeutic tool that helps people build solutions to their problems. He went on to suggest that compliments can "normalize" a client's experience, restructure the meaning of the problem, and highlight their own solution-building competencies. Regarding the benefits of the use of compliments in solution-focused counselling, Campbell, Elder, Gallagher, Simon and Taylor (1999) remark "quite often clients state during exit interviews that the compliments were the most helpful part of therapy. They tell us that our compliments helped them to better understand their situations, made them feel heard, and gave them a sense of hope and optimism. They also report appreciating the positive focus and recognition of their resources"(p. 35). Compliments must, however, be delivered only in a completely genuine fashion (Davis & Osborn, 2000). Compliments can take on one of four forms (Campbell et al., 1999), namely, normalizing statements, restructuring statements, affirmations, and bridging statements.

*Normalizing statements.* This is a form of complimenting that simply lets the client know that his or her problem is understandable and is commonly shared by others in similar situations. The following is an example of how a normalizing statement might be used in a career counselling session. Robert is a 37-year-old client who sought career counselling because he was not feeling very satisfied in his position as regional manager for a major national bank. Robert expressed some guilt over the fact that he wasn't satisfied with his job, which offered him a good compensation package and rapid promotions. Repeatedly during the first session, Robert wondered aloud whether he was 'crazy' to complain about his work. A normalizing statement, such as the following, could be used to help the

client understand that his problem is explicable and “normal”: “It makes sense that you’re not completely satisfied with your present line of work. You’ve always been interested in helping people, and as a regional bank manager, you are unable to express this need fully.”

*Restructuring statements.* Such statements are effectively used when a client sees his/her problem as being outside of his/her control, for example, an overly critical boss or an unsupportive partner. A solution-focused counsellor can take the experiences of the client and reshape them so that solutions become more apparent. Linda is a 53-year-old client who has been off work for three years due to a severe injury she sustained in a skiing accident. She cannot return to her previous job as an airline attendant (due to her injury) and would like to use her newly acquired computer skills in an administrative position. After four months of job searching, however, Linda has not found work and has labeled the problem as “discrimination against older workers”. To give this client a more useful way of thinking about the problem, the counsellor uses the following restructuring statement: “Based on what you’ve been through with your injury and your more recent disappointing experience with a job search, it’s no wonder that you’re ready to give up. However, you’ve made an excellent start in your job search, and you’re to be commended for getting to this point”.

*Affirmations.* These statements provide positive feedback, demonstrating to the client how his or her own resources will be beneficial in developing solutions. David is a client in his sixties who was recently laid off from his position as lab manager with a well-respected research organization. He knows that his skills are current and very marketable, but he considers himself “very introverted” and he dreads having to make contact with potential employers. This fear is so strong that he is considering early retirement, even though he loves his work. David had earlier spoken to the counsellor of his exceptional writing skills, and she uses this to affirm him of a clear job-hunting strength: “I’m most impressed that you are still pursuing a job search in spite of your fear. Your uniquely strong writing ability will be enormously helpful in exploring new opportunities and explaining your strengths to potential employers”.

*Bridging statements.* These are in the form of suggestions that serve to link potential next steps with the problem (or part thereof) as described by the client. For example, Christopher is an accomplished writer who is seeking a contract to write a series of travel books. He is confident in his ability to complete the contract, but not in his ability to sell himself in a job interview. He speaks very quickly, and so much so in an interview that he slurs his words and becomes almost completely incomprehensible. To connect his problem with a possible solution, while also providing a compliment, the counsellor makes the following bridging statement: “People who speak quickly demonstrate that they are excited by the topic of which they are speaking. I wonder what would happen if in your interview you simply pause for a moment and say ‘I’m sorry for speaking so

quickly, but this is what happens when I'm really excited about something. The idea of writing these travel books is just so thrilling to me!"

### *Exceptions*

Finding exceptions to the existence of a client's problem is a technique used in solution-focused counselling, as well as one of its general principles (as described above). DeShazer (1988) defined an exception as, "whatever is happening when the complaint is not" (p. 52) and suggests that if exceptions are not asked about they go unnoticed. The major benefit of exceptions is that they create stories that make it possible for the client to learn from what they are already doing and to see success. Milner and O'Byrne (2002) describe working with exceptions as "following the client's easiest path". When a client cannot identify an exception, then an exception can be pretended. For example, the client could try living for a week as if the problem was less of a problem. When exceptions are found the counsellor then proceeds by asking questions such as, "What was different?", "What do they say about you?", and especially, "How did you do that?". This latter question serves to empower the client, shifting the locus of control to him or her.

In using exceptions in career counselling, the counsellor helps the client look at a career problem from a different angle or with a different mindset. Thus, the client's perception and experience about the problem can alter, providing more room and possibility to construct solutions. For example, Sebastian has been a successful real estate agent for twelve years. Though he enjoys his work, he states that he feels constantly stressed and is never able to relax due to the "round-the-clock" and on-call nature of his work. Knowing that problem patterns are not rigidly fixed, the counsellor seeks to find the exception to Sebastian's experience of stress: "You were saying that your stress is worse this year than last year. How were things different for you then?" Once the client has described how things were different, the counsellor prompts the client to give greater detail about what was better a year ago: "You said your wife was on maternity leave last year when things were better. What was happening at that time that relieved your stress?" This line of questioning ultimately demonstrates to the client that the problem can be improved, and he brings about his own two solutions to the problem. First, he starts his work each day at noon (as he had done when his wife was on maternity leave to allow her to rest). Second, he hires someone to clean the house two times a week (as he finds the chaos and disorganization created by having two children to be very stressful).

### *The "miracle question"*

This is one of the interventions most closely associated with solution-focused counselling (DeShazer, 1985). The question's key feature is that it elicits from the client possible solutions and ideas that they may not have previously considered. Milner and O'Byrne (2002) compare these questions to a guided fantasy. The question is phrased something as follows: "Suppose that when you leave here you

go out and do what you have to do, you get home, have something to eat and later on you go to bed. While you are asleep something miraculous happens and the problems that brought you here vanish, in the click of a finger. But because you were asleep you don't know this has happened. When you wake up in the morning, what do you suppose will be the first thing you will notice that will tell you that this has happened?" (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002, p. 45). As much detail as possible should be elicited from the client following his/her first response, with questions such as "What are you doing?" or "Who is with you?" This miracle question helps the client to articulate a clear picture of the "better future", a future where his/her current problem does not exist (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002).

The miracle question is a natural fit for the career counsellor working with clients who are dissatisfied with their present work. For example, Martha is a young woman in her thirties with two young children. She currently works part-time as an administrative assistant with the local community college. She has a degree in nutrition, though she never put it to use as she started a family right after finishing her degree. She took on her current job because she was not interested in pursuing her former goal of becoming a dietician, and because she wanted the ability to work part-time and be at home part-time. Her children are now both in school full-time, and she has decided that she is ready to work full-time as well. However, she has no idea what she would like to do and can't picture herself anywhere but at the college. The following version of the miracle question is used to help Martha think about what she would like for her future: "Suppose you are able to go into the future, say five years from now. You are able to peek into your life as it will be at that time. You had the fortunate opportunity four years ago to design the job of your choice. You are now looking at yourself doing that ideal job. What are you doing?" Once the client has given a preliminary response to the question, the counsellor can seek more clarification by asking: "Who are you with?", "What time did you go into work?", "What is on the walls around you?", or "What tools are you using that help you do your job?"

## **Conclusion**

Solution-focused therapy is a time-sensitive and pragmatic approach that focuses on helping clients construct solutions to their psychological difficulties in personal and social aspects of life. This article sought to utilize the solution-focused approach in career counselling intervention. In this attempt, it has linked some key theoretical principles from the solution-focused counselling to the career counselling context, demonstrating that many of these theoretical principles can be pertinent to framing some viable conceptual groundwork for the career counselling process in the current world of work. In the meanwhile, several commonly used solution-focused therapeutic techniques have also been incorporated into a range of career counselling scenarios, illustrating the technical applicability of solution-focused interventions to the career counselling practice.

Applying theoretical and technical components from solution-focused counselling to career counselling seems philosophically and clinically congruent for

career counsellors as a modality to promote career enrichment and vocational well being. Although the present consideration to make bridge between the two counselling modes is an inductive attempt, it has presented some interesting thoughts in search for more effective and efficient career counselling approaches. It concludes that to enhance theory and practice development, career counselling can enrich itself by continuously learning, absorbing, and digesting useful ideas and techniques from other counselling and therapeutic models.

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