A Conscious Career Choice

A study in the efficacy of projective drawing, a narrative approach to career choice

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Abstract

It is well accepted that objective and subjective approaches to career management complement each other. Human beings are naturally concerned about their careers. Since the beginnings of career management in early 1900s, the 'objective' approach to career choice has been based on a rational and logical matching of skills, vocational traits and experiences with particular career choices. Since the 1990s, a new 'subjective career' approach has emerged, in which clients describe or write about their career histories in a process that reveals meanings, connections and an understanding of possible future careers. By looking within, clients author work stories that they can choose to live.

Another well accepted and practiced narrative technique used in a clinical setting is projective drawing, where the blank page serves as a canvas on which a client can sketch his or her inner world of traits, attitudes, behaviors, strengths and weaknesses. There appears to be an absence of empirical studies on the use of projective drawing in exploring career choices. To understand whether projective drawing can offer insights into career options, I conducted a qualitative study using eight participants who were in the process of making a significant career choice. They undertook a self-portrait drawing exercise, immediately followed by a two-hour, semi-structured interview discussing what they had drawn. Results from this study found that the narrative technique of projective drawing provided a high level of clarity and reinforced core issues that had an impact on career choice. Interestingly, it provided the individuals with valuable insights into connections and associations that had previously seemed unrelated to career choice.

Keywords: career counseling, narrative, projective drawing, art therapy, career choice

Introduction

From a very young age, people engage in the internal dialogue, 'What will I be when I grow up?' In adulthood, this transitions into the universal personal and professional introduction question, 'What do you do?' It is well accepted that we spend more time working than undertaking any other waking activity. Therefore it is not surprising that we are career-focused and career-concerned. The importance of career was recognized as early as 1909 by the 'father' of vocation guidance, Frank Parsons, who wrote: 'No step in life, unless it is a choice of husband or wife, is more important than the choice of a vocation' (Parsons, 1909 p. 3). A dramatic shift is happening in career game plans; people are yearning to move away from the linear corporate ladder to careers that offer authenticity, deep personal satisfaction and meaning. This shift has been described in the literature (Hall, 1996; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) and is supported by my own professional experiences as a career coach.

A different career conversation is needed to support this shift. Since the early 1900s, the known beginnings of career management, counselors have used an objective career approach to match interests, abilities and knowledge about work to a job. Today, this approach is still used extensively in career counseling. In the 1990s, counselors also adopted a subjective career approach, encouraging clients to narrate their past and present life stories, uncovering roles, meanings and connections that they wanted to live out (Savickas, 1993). Such patterns emerge through storytelling and collaborative dialogue with a counselor (Brott, 2001, 2004; McIlveen & Patton, 2007). This is known as the narrative career counseling approach, in which the client and counselor co-construct, deconstruct and then construct a future career (Brott, 2004).

In my role as a career coach, I began to reflect on the approaches that were being used to allow these powerful stories to emerge. It was evident in the literature that the qualitative tools for creating narrative perspective were primarily verbal. Examples included cards, lifelines, circles of life, autobiographies, goal maps, family constellations and construct laddering (Cochran, 1997; Christensen & Johnston, 2003; McIlveen & Patton,, 2007; Stebleton, 2010). Serendipitously, in my Executive Masters on Coaching and Consulting for Change at INSEAD, I was introduced to a projective drawing exercise where I was directed to draw a self-portrait. Drawing freely and then using the drawing to narrate my life story was a very powerful exercise. My own experiences and the observations of others showed how useful this technique could be in revealing life stories, often involving hardships and disappointments, connecting and making meaning of these experiences and constructing an image of a fuller, better future. The familiar metaphor, 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' came alive. The literature on projective drawing as a form of art therapy shows it to be an accepted approach for assessing and treating individuals and groups in a clinical setting (Amundson, 1988; Leibowitz, 1999; Oster & Crone, 2004; Malchiodi, 2012). It provides a non-verbal way to communicate a deep array of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences. There is an ongoing and lively debate about the validity of projective drawing; what is clear is that clients must interpret their own work.

I was intrigued to find out whether art therapy, through the self-portrait projective drawing exercise, could meaningfully contribute to creating new meanings, connections and associations that could help people choose careers. I applied an interpretative phenomenological approach to a group of eight participants in the process of making new career choices. Using the self-portrait as a primary vehicle for discovery, each participant and I explored his or her life story, present situation and possible future life and career.

Findings from this study showed that the self-portrait exercise allowed for widely different life stories to emerge. Four themes emerged from the projective drawing exercise, providing valuable insights and connections for the individuals making their career choices. This thesis aims to expand the current narrative coaching framework to incorporate projective drawing as a key qualitative technique to support people in making a career choice, by constructing future careers that are meaningful and integrated with other aspects of their lives.

Literature Review

The Evolution of Career Management Frameworks

Objective Approach—Parsons' 'Trait and Factor' Methodology

It is commonly believed that career management frameworks originated with the work of Frank Parsons, known as the 'father of vocational guidance,' in 1909. Some 100 years later, Parsons' original three-part theory still dominates most career coaching dialogues, in which a counselor first studies the client, then explores possible occupations, and finally matches the client to an occupation:

> 'In the wise choice of a vocation, there are three broad factors: 1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations and knowledge of their causes; 2) a knowledge of the requirements, conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities and prospects in different lines of work; and 3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts.' (Parsons, 1909, p. 5)

Parsons' 'trait and factor' methodology constitutes an objective, logical and systematic approach to career choice and management.

The Subjective Approach—Career Narrative Counseling

During the 1980s, a profound shift took place, displacing the static and objective 'trait and factor' matching theory with a constructivist approach in which career was understood as a story. Green (1999) addressed the limitations of objectivity and highlighted the significance of this narrative approach in providing a far more holistic profile of clients:

> 'For career counseling to be most effective, it should be far more than the mere objective matching of the skills and personality traits of an individual to those required by a particular career. This objective assessment provides only a freeze-frame of a person at a particular point in time. It is important that a wider perspective should be taken, viewing the person as a whole, and taking into account life history, goals and personal circumstances.'(Green, 1999, p. 446)

Other contributors to the integration of narrative in career counseling included Savickas (1993), Cochran (1997), Brott (2001) and Reid & West (2011).

In constructing a career narrative, clients recount their past and present lives, including their career experiences. The resulting insights (into how they have become the people they are) enable them to create new and meaningful future career narratives. At the heart of the career narrative approach is the dialogue between client and counselor; this leads to the discovery of meanings and connections involving past recollections, present feelings and future goals, rather than focusing on particular elements (Brott, 2001; Christensen et al., 2003). Through these new understandings and insights, clients are able to construct a desirable narrative for their future careers.

Brott (2001) describes three phases in the narrative career counseling process: 1) co-construction, 2) deconstruction and 3) construction. **Co-construction** begins with the process of *revealing,* in which clients recount their past and present experiences. In **deconstruction,** clients work one-on-one with counselors to 'unpack' their stories, exploring them from different perspectives and identifying connections and associations. Through this process, a client becomes aware of meanings and key insights. In the final **construction** phase, the client recreates his or her stories with a future orientation (Brott, 2001). It is evident that this process extends beyond finding a job to acquiring self-knowledge and making the transition to a preferred way of being.

Several factors can explain why the narrative approach has emerged and embedded itself in career counseling. To begin with, narratives or stories constitute one of the common ways in which people across all cultures communicate with each other and make sense of their lives, behavior, thoughts and feelings. 'Storytelling is one means through which we may come to know an individual, and through which an individual may acquire greater self-knowledge, self-narration affording access to a more 'authentic' inner self' (Townley, 1995, in Maclean & Chia, 2012, p. 18). Storytelling has proven to be an effective technique in various professional practices, including psychotherapy, family counseling, medicine, education, healthcare and research (Reid & West, 2011).

The literature and my own observations as an executive coach reveal a trend in the way people think about their careers; this has begun to transform the landscape of career counseling. In the last two decades, people's career plans have changed drastically from those of their predecessors. They are now characterized by the merging of work and 'true' selves, in a quest to fulfill personal needs and desires through careers. Hall (1996) offered a powerful affirmation of this shift in thinking in his article, 'Protean Careers of the 21st Century':

'The ultimate goal of the career is psychological success, the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one's most important goals in life, be they achievement, family happiness, inner peace, or something else. This is in contrast to vertical success under the old career contract, where the goal was climbing the corporate pyramid and making a lot of money. While there is only one way to achieve vertical success (making it to the top), there are infinite ways to achieve psychological success, as many ways as there are unique human needs.' (Hall, 1996, p. 8)

In practice, this change in the career game plan typically entails a move from linear or corporate ladder-driven to meaningful careers. 'Meaningful activities were those that were purposeful, personally fulfilling, stimulating, challenging or aligned with personal values. Meaningful engagement elicited positive emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, excitement, peacefulness, contentment and pleasure' (Amundson et al., 2010, p. 58). Scholars such as Stebleton (2010) and Reid (2005) have also identified the following limitations of the narrative approach in career management:

1. excessive focus on finding, understanding and uncovering problems, with inadequate attention to specific actions;

2. transfer of the role of 'expert' from coach to client;

3. dependence on clients' willingness and ability to verbally articulate their stories;

4. significant time consumption;

5. ambiguity without a 'right' answer; and

6. limited evidence to verify its effectiveness, unlike traditional approaches using psychometric inventories.

It is important to point out that advocates of career narrative based approaches do not discount the use of the trait and factor approach, considering it a tool that can provide qualitative data on abilities, interests and personalities. This information complements the insights elicited through the narrative approach (Cochran, 1997; Brott, 2001; Christensen et al., 2003; Stebleton, 2010). In their view, these two approaches can be integrated effectively to support career choice and management.

Projective Drawing as a Narrative Approach in Career Choice

Established narrative techniques, such as life line, autobiography, journaling, early recollections, structured interview, card sorts, conceptual mapping, career laddering, genograms and life role circles have been used in narrative career counseling to help clients tell their life stories. Table 1 provides an overview of these techniques.

Table 1: *Narrative Career Counseling Techniques*

Technique	Reference	Primary Vehicle for Exploration	Process
Vocational card sort	Dolliver (1967)	60 cards with job title on front of card and job description on back.	Client is asked to divide cards into three piles based on following criteria: jobs they find attractive, jobs they would reject and jobs they are uncertain about. Narrative exploration is focused on the attractive and reject piles.
Construct laddering	Kelly (1955)	Client needs to provide 10 occupations of interest	Elicit 10 occupations of interest from the client. Select three and explore the client's narrative explanation of their similarities and differences. Continue this process using different combinations of the 10 occupations until you reach a construct that clearly makes sense to the client.
Goal mapping	Unknown	Piece of paper where the client writes his or her goals based on a	The client develops a goal map based on his or her future narrative; this covers obstacles,

		future narrative (construction step of career narrative).	resources, next steps and timeframe.
Life circle roles	Brown & Brooks (1991)	Piece of paper with 5 circles representing the amount of time and importance of each life role.	Client is asked to draw 5 circles with the size of the circle representing the importance of each life role (family, work, leisure, community and learning). These are then explored, after which the client is asked to draw the 5 circles he or she would like in the future. The client discovers how important these roles are and either accepts or is motivated to change them.
Life line	Brott (2001)	A piece of paper with a line drawn through it and an arrowhead at the right-hand end of the line	Above the line, the client plots positive, happy experiences and below the line painful, unhappy ones. These are then unpacked through the client's narrative.
Written report	Cochran (1997)	Client's writing	The client is asked to write a report with five sections: mission statement, strengths, work needs, vulnerabilities and possibilities. This report is explored with a counselor.

(Cochran, 1997; Christensen et al., 2003)

In these career narrative techniques, the primary vehicle used by the client to find meaning and connections is through their verbal communication. Throughout history, we have found visual records of human self-expression and communication through non-verbal symbols, in cave paintings, sculptures, dream catchers, masks, ritual pottery and other artifacts and costumes (Provencal & Gabora, 2007). Art-making is understood to be an inborn human tendency; art therapy professionals would argue that, together with speech and tool-making, art defines human beings (Dissanayake, 1992). As a powerful form of human narrative expression, art appears to be unexplored in the career counseling context. Through my research, I have identified only one qualitative career assessment process that incorporates art through projective drawing: a guided reflection entitled *My System of Career Influences (MSCI)* by McMahon and Watson, 2008. MSCI

is presented in a structured booklet. As part of the process, client are asked to draw influences on their careers, including values, parents or the employment market. These drawings form part of the client's reflection.

The Historical Background of Projective Drawing, an Art Therapy Technique

In considering why projective drawings should be incorporated into career counseling, it is important to have a concise understanding of the origins of this technique. Aptly described by the familiar adage, 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' an image can evoke a powerful and at times out-of-the-ordinary emotional response. This phenomenon underpins the psychotherapeutic practice of art therapy, as described by Hammer (1958):

> 'The drawing page serves as a canvas upon which the subject may sketch a glimpse of his inner world, his traits and attitudes, his behavioral characteristics, his personality strengths and weaknesses including the degree to which he can mobilize his inner resources to handle both psychodynamic conflicts, both interpersonal and intrapsychic.' (Hammer, 1958, p. 6)

The psychological evaluation of a person through drawings dates back to the late 1800s, when French psychiatrists Ambrose Tardieu and Paul-Max Simon researched the creative works of the mentally ill to assist them in making psychological diagnoses. Sigmund Freud made significant contributions to projective drawing in a psychotherapeutic context. Freud observed that many of his patients' meaningful narratives involved the description of visual images. He hypothesized that these visual images represented forgotten memories and were likely to emerge through dreams: 'We experience it [a dream] predominately through visual images…part of the difficulty of giving an account of dreams is due to our having to translate these images into words, 'I could draw it,' a dreamer often says to us, 'but I don't know how to say it'' (Freud, 1916–1917, in Malchiodi 2012,

p. 58). Freud's other significant contribution to art therapy was the concept of the unconscious, considered to be the source of images generated through the technique of projective drawing. The creation of images was a spontaneous unfolding, but the interpretation was directed by Freud, who controlled the interpretation of their symbolic significance, rather than the client themselves. Carl Jung also contributed to the field of art therapy but with a different approach from Freud. Jung employed undirected art therapy; inviting patients to paint and to use art as a vehicle for undertaking their own self-analysis and exploration, helping them find meaning and wholeness in their lives (Malchiodi, 2012). With both these major psychoanalytic figures incorporating emergent symbols and artistic expression into their clinical practices, drawing became a popular topic of discussion in the mental health community.

In the second half of the 20th century, Margaret Naumburg emerged as major contributor to art psychotherapy. Naumburg is often referred to as the 'mother of art therapy' (Malchiodi, 2012). Projective drawing was a key part of her psychoanalytic framework. Instead of transforming visual experiences into verbal communication, patients could express unconscious material directly through image. 'Art therapy recognizes that the unconscious as expressed in a patient's phantasies, daydreams and fears can be projected more immediately in pictures than words' (Naumburg, 1966 p. 3).

Today, projective drawing is an accepted therapeutic technique used with children, adolescents and adults; the art serves as both catalyst and conduit for understanding oneself. The known benefits of projective drawing are first, that drawings are seen as less threatening because participants can portray emotions and ideas that they could not easily describe, allowing them to view themselves more objectively through artwork and providing an 'indirect' platform for discussion and exploration. Second, they are known to help provide a focused discussion, bringing to the surface unconscious issues that are needed for diagnosis. Drawing provides a new creative

approach, potentially enlarging the participant's framework for communicating emotional and interpersonal problems and needs. Finally, the drawings allow participants to externalize their feelings by creating tangible objects in the form of pictures (Oster & Crone., 2004).

Although benefits have been observed, the use and interpretation of projective drawings to understand emotional conflicts, desires and fantasies has also been criticized, on grounds that most supporting evidence has come from anecdotal single case studies (Oster & Crone., 2004).

Projective Drawing in Non-Clinical Settings

Art therapy is gradually being introduced in organizational settings (Sandel, 1987; Turner & Clark-Schock, 1990; Westwood, 2007) as a methodology for exploration and discovery. Jill Westwood, from the School of Social Sciences at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, conducted a workshop exploring the interface between art therapy and organizational interventions. The participants were invited to 'picture their organization' through a visual exercise that used drawing materials and images from newspapers and magazines. According to Westwood (2007, p. 54), 'The creative, visual and reflective process it offers brings a new perspective from which to view and contribute to the world of organizational management.'

Another example of a projective drawing exercise in a non-clinical setting is the 'self-portrait' activity that has been incorporated in a number of INSEAD's programs. The self-portrait exercise requires the participant to draw his or her own work, leisure, past, future and 'what's in their heart, head, and gut' (Kets de Vries, 2011). It serves as an integral tool in the self-discovery process of the Executive MBA (EMBA), Executive Masters for Coaching & Consulting for Change (CCC) and all INSEAD Global Leadership Centre's (IGLC) group coaching sessions. Manfred Kets de Vries, Founder of IGLC, developed the self-portrait exercise 20 years ago, to use in his

Challenge of Leadership Program in personal communication. He emphasizes its effectiveness in eliciting revealing insights:

> 'This is a fun, but highly effective, way to draw participants into the transitional space—and have them say important things about themselves. If conditions of feeling safe are met, the members of a group (or team) will venture to share relevant personal information, while explaining their self-portrait.' (Kets de Vries, 2011, p. 215–216)

I have experienced the self-portrait projective drawing exercise while participating in INSEAD's CCC program. Reflecting on my personal experience, I found this projective drawing exercise to be a powerful tool in building greater awareness of and clarity about behaviors, attitudes, self-beliefs and assumptions that were impeding me in achieving greater levels of fulfillment across my life. As a Career Coach for INSEAD EMBAs, during the coaching sessions, I informally enquired about their self-portrait experiences and whether any new insights had been gained. All had found the process of drawing to be non-threatening and felt they had externalized issues and feelings, through the descriptive narrative of their drawings, that were important in understanding personal effectiveness and satisfaction.

Interpretations of Projective Drawings

When using drawings, it is critical to allow clients to interpret and talk about the significance of their own pictures. Avoiding interpretation is important, as most therapists are not trained in the intricacies of art therapy and even those who are trained work to avoid over-interpretation (Naumburg, 1987). Although some agreed structural interpretation procedures are established in a clinical setting, and can provide paths for discovery, it is the client's prerogative to confirm or reject

any suggested symbolism (Hammer, 1958;; Leibowitz, 1999). At the same time, questions and comments from the counselor about feelings associated with the drawing may provide important feedback and information for the client and act as a springboard for discussion.

In undertaking this research, I read a great number of works by major contributors on the structural analysis of projective drawings. In particular, Hammer (1958), Leibowitz (1999), Oster & Crone (2004) and Malchiodi (2012) intrigued me. I am not a trained art therapist, but thought it would be interesting to apply the basic principles of projective drawing interpretation and to test these ideas with study participants to determine whether any relevant insights could be gained for the participant.

Marvin Leibowitz (1999) described a user-friendly method of performing a structural interpretation of projective drawings, focusing on the following structural aspects: line quality and shading, size, placement and color. The remainder of this section will explore of each of these aspects.

Size

In interpreting the significance of size, the counselor gauges the size of the drawing on a continuum ranging between huge and small, in relation to the size of the paper the client has drawn on. Typically, size is a reflection of the client's self-esteem; for instance, small drawings can indicate signs of inadequacy and withdrawal, while huge drawings are associated with feelings of being constrained by one's environment. In such cases, the client may show signs of frustration and disappointment (Hammer, 1958).

Placement

Placement refers to the location of objects on the paper, in the center, bottom, top, sides or corners. Placing a drawing in the center conveys a feeling of security, confidence, presence and immediacy.

Its positioning in the exact center could also indicate rigidity, or the need to have everything in place in order to feel secure. Top placement (above the midline of the paper) suggests that the subject feels that he or she is striving hard, but that goals are unattainable. Such individuals are often perceived as 'lost in the clouds.' When drawings are placed near the bottom, the subject is oriented towards the concrete (Hammer, 1958). Corner placements reflect a tendency to withdraw from the here and now, as well as fear and a sense of inadequacy.

Color

What color is chosen and how extensively or selectively it is used suggests certain meanings, giving feeling, mood and tone to a particular picture. If only one color (or one color and black) is used on a whole object, the impression is one of constriction. The use of two to five colors projects a sense of freedom and flexibility. In considering the subjective meanings attributed to colors, Luscher's (1969) analysis offers a basis for determining and interpreting the emotional states of clients during the act of drawing, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: *Interpretation of Colors*

Colors	Emotional state	Interpretation
Blue	Calmness, peace, and contentment	While it evokes a sense of depth, it can also indicate an excessive wish for calm.
Green*	Aliveness and expansiveness	When used extensively, it may reflect a wish to increase certainty of one's own value by increasing one's self-assertiveness or seeking others' acknowledgement.
Red	Excitement and desire	It projects action and impulsivity, possibly aggression. Clients who use the color red strive for competition, success and achievement. When used extensively, this color also

		suggests an excessive wish for intensity of experience.
Yellow	Aspiration and relaxation	When used extensively, it reveals a desire to be released from burdens and expectations of greater happiness.
Purple	Impulsivity of red and gentleness of blue	It reflects the client's desire to be perceived as special and unique.
Orange	Relaxation of yellow and the desire for action and excitement of red	The color orange may be associated with feelings of ambivalence. When used extensively, it may indicate excessive indecisiveness.
Brown*	Rootedness	The sense of rootedness may also reflect the need for security. When used extensively, it reveals the client's insecurity.
Black* — negation of color	Nothingness	When used extensively, black connotes dissatisfaction, restlessness, and depression.

*As many colors have expected uses (e.g., green for leaves, brown for tree trunks, and black to outline objects), moderate usage in such cases would not convey the above connotations.

In today's career choice and management landscape, career counselors and coaches are encountering an increasing number of clients who are seeking meaningful careers in which their work and personal identities can be aligned. Rather than just climbing the corporate ladder, they also strive to attain deep fulfillment and satisfaction in their lives. This trend has supported the emergence and consolidation of the subjective narrative approach that empowers clients to create stories and find meaning in the trajectory of their lives and career development. The ultimate objective of this approach is to empower clients to construct desirable narratives for their future careers.

Projective drawing can be used in a clinical context and extended to non-clinical organizational contexts to bolster narrative expression. The purpose of this research study is thus to address the gap in the literature by evaluating the effectiveness of projective drawing in the career coaching process: *To what extent could projective drawing help clients in making desirable career choices?*

Methodology

Research Objective

This study seeks to understand the extent to which projective drawing, an art therapy technique, could contribute to the narrative career counseling approach in eliciting new or different associations, insights, connections or nuances relevant to a participant's process of career change. I have defined career change as a change in function, industry or geography.

Research Methodology

For my research study, I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as my research methodology. IPA offers a detailed exploration of the participant's life and world and explores the personal experience and perception of an object or event (Smith & Osborn, 2003). With IPA, the researcher plays an active role in assisting participants to derive meaning and forge connections from their narratives.

Sample

I used purposeful sampling to identify information-rich cases. Specifically, all prospective participants were interviewed to ensure that they met the following two criteria for participation in

the research study: 1) they were currently in the process of a career change; and 2) they could commit five hours in total to the research study. Based on the aforementioned criteria, eight participants were selected, four men and four women, aged between 38 and 52 years.

Data Collection

Three sets of narrative data were collected from each participant, through the following three phases: questionnaire, project drawing exercise and semi-structured interview.

Phase 1

    Questionnaire. Prior to the projective drawing exercise, a questionnaire was emailed to the participants who were instructed to email back their responses one week before undertaking phases 2 and 3 below. This questionnaire had six questions designed to encourage and focus the participants' reflections on their career choices past and present and on any vision of their futures (see Appendix 1). On average, participants took 2–3 hours to complete this questionnaire. I read this questionnaire prior to phases 2 and 3, to develop a 'feel' for each individual's career choices past, present and future.

Phase 2

    Projective drawing exercise. This was conducted one-on-one at the INSEAD campus. Participants were provided with a piece of A3-sized white paper and colored pens. They were then given the following instructions:

- Draw a self-portrait consisting of your heart, head, gut, work, leisure, past, and future. Do not use numbers or letters.
- Sign the picture when you have completed your drawing.

Participants were given 20 minutes to complete the activity on their own. The short duration was to encourage them not to over-think but to be spontaneous in their drawing. I did not observe them drawing, believing that they would be less inhibited if I were not present.

Phase 3

Semi-structured interview. To start the interview, participants were asked, 'Where would you like to start their story of your self-portrait?' Participants were invited to describe their images. From here, the general discussion was client-directed, with no predetermined sequencing constraining the interaction between participants and myself. As much as possible, I strove to achieve the ideal, as stated by McIlveen in 2007: 'An aim of the process is to create a space in which the client can hear his or her own voice openly talking about career, perhaps for the first time' (McIIveen & Patton, 2007, p. 231). The interviews lasted approximately two hours, and were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis. The participants' transcripts were read a number of times in conjunction with their projective drawings; narratives of interest and significance to career choice were highlighted. I then returned to the transcript and looked for emergent themes across these narratives. Next I looked for connections between the emergent themes. This process was repeated for all participants. The final step was to identify thematic repetitions between participants and to record these.

Findings

In terms of presenting the narratives and drawings in a non-clinical setting, I decided to adopt the approach used by Jill Westwood (2007), as it closely reflected my research process (using a small group of individuals doing themed drawings, immediately followed by a discussion of the images in a non-clinical setting). Westwood captured her findings by presenting the visual images, followed by a summary of keywords to describe the visual content of the image and relevant themes raised by the participant; she titled this: 'Visual Contents and Expressed Narrative Themes'. She included her own response to the materials as 'commentary'. Of the eight participants, I present below detailed findings relating to six; no new additional themes emerged in the work of the remaining two participants. To guarantee anonymity, all names have been omitted from the findings.

Participant 1

Visual content and expressed narrative themes

Participant 1 drew his self-portrait in monochromatic black, representing each of the seven items as separate images. A prominent image of a winding river representing 'work' was positioned through the *exact* midline of the paper from top to bottom. The river image separated his 'heart', 'head' and 'gut' on the left-hand side, which he referred to as 'internal,' from his leisure, past and future on the right-hand side, which he referred to as 'external.'

He chose to begin his reflection on the self-portrait with the picture of a heart that encompasses within it smaller hearts and a group of circles: 'My heart is a machine, a motor, chugging along and always cranking out something… It has a mechanical side to it, but also a very loving side.' As he spoke on the 'heart,' he also brought up his upbringing:

> 'We were hippies… we were a bit of a social misfit… we were poor. My parents were fairly radical in the 60s—questioned authority and always trying to do things differently. My father left when I was five years old. It was difficult; we didn't have much.'

As Participant 1 told his story, he drew on the influences of his upbringing to explain the other parts of his self-portrait. The keywords he used when narrating his career past, present and future were: *drive to be better than anyone else; pushing boundaries; challenging authority; knew no limits; needs autonomy; trusting an individual is difficult; self-driven; fierce sense of independence;* and *strong need for recognition.*

He spoke about his gut, which contained a curly line resembling a corkscrew and a vice as:

> '…internally squeezing [him] to improve and be better—better in fitness, better in family, better in career direction, better knowledge also more control. [It's as though] if I understand the situation better than others, I won't be at risk of being left behind or sidelined… In my career, I have been a bridesmaid too many times.'

He concluded his description of his heart, head, and gut with the following statement:

'…family- and health-wise, I feel privileged, but this one piece, career, is not perfect… I have never felt sorry for myself, but in recent times, I have captured myself feeling sorry and it disturbs me…'

His work was represented by the central image of the river in his self-portrait, it started at the top of the page with a number of tributaries that merged into one river, widening at one point and then narrowing. The narrow stretch contained a number of curves split into two tributaries that remained open with a question mark. Participant 1 offered an insightful narrative to explain his image:

'…I was on different paths when I was younger and that fell into place… The wide river demonstrates the time when my career was getting bigger and bigger… I didn't see it coming, but suddenly, I hit some rapids which then fell off to a steep waterfall and went into the muck in 2009. Since then, I have tried a number of paths, but all in the muck…'

Looking at his depiction of his past and future, it was interesting to note that the image of the past—a line graph—appeared to be lost amidst the detailed and vivid images of his future. Though the line graph contained troughs of varying degrees of depth, its general pattern was on the rise. Therefore, despite the ups and downs, his life had progressed in a desirable direction. Nonetheless, his present paled in significance and quality in comparison with his depiction of the future as 'something [he] could clearly visualize with [his] three children in university in the USA, a house in USA and Singapore, [his] wife having a successful business, and the financial ability to travel and pursue his sporting endeavors, surrounded by a small group of close friends.'

Participant 1 was very contemplative throughout the interview and really valued the process: 'I found the drawing and the follow-up enquiry very valuable, as it helped join some dots for me and you can cover a lot of ground without you knowing it—a useful catalyst for discussion.' He wanted to share the image with his wife, as he stated that 'she was a great source of objectivity for him at this time of career choice.'

Commentary

Based on my interaction with Participant 1, I sensed that 'getting his career back on track' was currently a burning priority in his life; this was corroborated by his verbal narrative and the very strong and prominent central placement of the river—the image that represented 'work'. As Leibowitz (1999) explained, the placement of an image at the exact center can be interpreted as the need to have everything balanced in order to feel secure, which seemed applicable to Participant 1. In the interview, he plainly stated that everything was in place in his life except for his work and the associated feelings of anxiety, fear, regret and feeling sorry for himself.

Intrigued by the fact that Participant 1 only used the color black in his drawing, I enquired whether this was a conscious choice, which elicited the following response: 'Black allowed me to focus and not get distracted by the other colors.' Upon further reflection, I wondered whether at an unconscious level, the use of the color black was a projection of the dissatisfaction and depression he was experiencing in his current state, with his 'career in the muck since 2009.'

Participant 1's spoken narrative identified a number of beliefs and traits derived from his family environment; these had continued to play out both positively and negatively in his career. He spoke about how growing up with limited financial means on the fringes of society contributed to his inner drive to be better than his peers, and built a strong sense of independence and self-determination. He spoke about growing up without a father, with a mother who was distracted by her own life, and with an absence of recognition and praise, although he desired them. During the deconstruction process, an understanding emerged about the tension between being self-reliant and needing autonomy in his professional life and the strong need for recognition from the C-suite, which had created unhappiness in his professional life.

Participant 1 demonstrated a high level of commitment to the process and engaged actively in the exercise and accompanying interview.

Participant 2
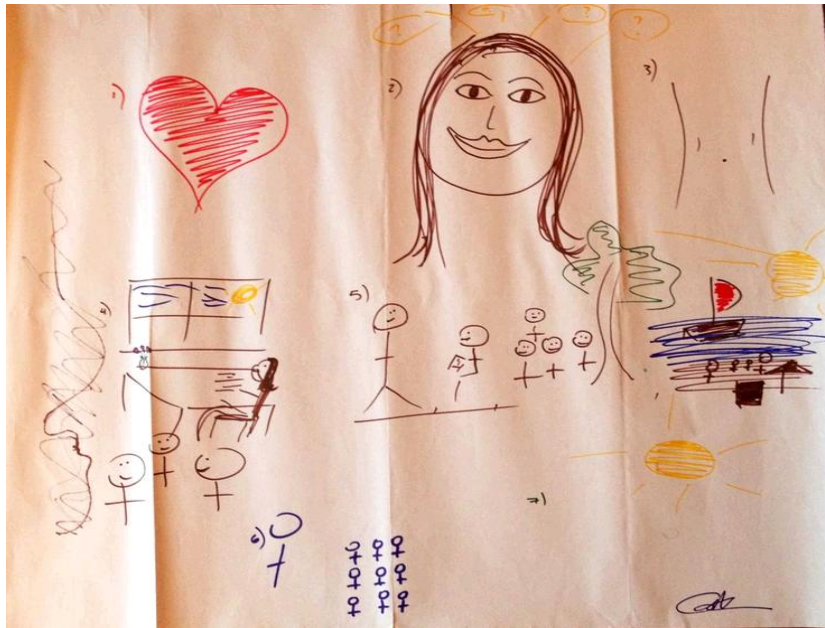
Visual content and expressed narrative themes

Participant 2 also chose to draw separate images for her self portrait. There were significant structural differences between the drawings of the two participants. First, Participant 2 introduced color into her images of 'heart,' 'future,' and 'leisure' and second, there was no central image.

In speaking about her self portrait, Participant 2 began with the 'heart' and 'head' and the words that recurred in her description of these images were: *stability, balance, healthy, happiness* and *fulfillment.* She then moved onto the 'gut,' where she saw her picture differently, as captured in this expression of surprise: 'There is the stomach… similar to the heart, I guess, fit, strong, healthy, flat is nice… *But hey,* it looks like a tree trunk—strong and balanced.' As part of the deconstruction process, I enquired, 'How do your head, heart and stomach feel at the moment?' Her answer revealed an internal tension:

'…I felt like I lost the sense of [myself], whatever that was and whoever that was. And that is part of the process that I am going through, of just regaining that. And I know that, part of that, is having something that's outside of my children, my husband, which is to give me a sense of purpose, beyond the obvious, and then hope for a career that also gives me more of a sense of a complete self and a sense of fulfillment…'

The image of her past was done in monochromatic dark blue: it depicted a traditional corporate structure of the boss who is drawn as a bigger figure than the staff—a group of small figures. She described her work in the past as 'boredom, politics and external stress, [which] is sometimes beyond your control, somebody else's stress on you.' In terms of her conceptualization of her preferred work scenario, she drew what she called her fantasy world, predominately brown with small flashes of different colors—a yellow sun and blue sky, along with green and red flowers:

'…So in my fantasy world, I really enjoy time alone reflecting, it's like spending time in total silence, like quiet, where everything's still. And I also enjoy being with people; my ideal world would be moments of this—where I have the time to work out and think, and just be at peace and at my pace—and also you know have some kind of communication with people. So I am not completely alone, but I am not completely working with people—so it's a nice balance of probably say 50-50…'

This participant was not attached to her drawing and stated that she did not want it or need to see it again.

Commentary

In studying Participant 2's drawing, I noted two visually opposing contrasts: brightly-colored images ('heart,' 'future,' and 'leisure') versus solitary dark colors ('head,' 'gut,' 'work' and 'past'). Upon further reflection, these opposites captured the two emotional extremes of Participant 2 during the interview. On the one hand, she was positive about her personal self, particularly with regards to her children and husband, mentioned in relation to heart, leisure and future. On the other hand, she demonstrated a complete lack of self-confidence, focus and direction, as well as an inability to take responsibility or commit to action in relation to work. I observed the emergence of a number of

internal tensions as she explained her self-portrait. She spoke about the two types of work that she

would love to do—writing and counseling:

> *[On writing]:* 'I just have a good time when I am doing it, and I am in flow. And the world just falls away, when that happens.'

> *[On counseling people]:* 'I enjoy it—I enjoy learning about people. I enjoy that I am adding some value for them. When they can walk away and they can have clarity about a situation that they were feeling anxious about, or a problem that they just didn't see an extra avenue, I feel good about it. It makes me feel happy'.

> Tensions in experimenting with these possible work identities seemed to be related

to family expectations that emerged when she spoke about her past:

> '…I mean I have part of my past, my family being you know expecting concrete careers you know and if you're gonna be serious you know you stay a law firm, you do this, you do that and so there is a little bit more in my mind I guess fantasy like, counseling and writing… not real careers...'

With regard to this phase of career exploration, she spoke about her excitement, as well as

her fear and anxiety, which were making her feel stuck:

> '…It is that first jump that I find really hard, because it's going from zero to something. And so I guess, I find that scary; so it's fairly unknown. I have nothing to lose, zero judgment, and it's probably fear of not reaching my own expectations. I have very high standards and high expectations for myself. There must be also some of that old junk, growing up, from before, from what you should be as an adult…'

Her narrative suggests that family expectations, which I sense have become her own

expectations [referred to as 'old junk'], may be inhibiting her ability to create and explore future

identities.

Unlike Participant 1's rich and specific images and supporting narrative of his future,

Participant 2's image was a simple and abstract yellow sun and a limited, short verbal narrative of

her future, '…being the sun, sunny, bright and strong and the world happy…' When I asked

whether she could provide any further insights into her future she replied, 'I can't tell you what this

sunny vision is today, I just know it is there, I just need to get there and I need to keep believing it is there and it's not going to come without work… I just don't know what the first step is…'

Participant 2 did not sign the picture and made it clear that she had no interest in keeping it. On reflection, I wondered whether her lack of interest could be related at an unconscious level to her inability to make any decisions about the actions required to understand what her next career choice should be. I sensed a lack of ownership, that she wanted someone else—for example, a coach or friend—to tell her what to do next. Throughout the interview, she spoke about needing a career counselor to 'push her [to] make the decisions' and 'push her over the cliff.' Near the end of the interview, she asked, 'What should I be doing?'

Based on my interactions with Participant 2, I sensed that she found the process 'sort of interesting,' although she was frustrated at not being able to identify any concrete or specific next steps during the process.

Participant 3

Visual content and expressed narrative themes

Like Participants 1 and 2, Participant 3 drew seven separate images to represent each of the items. However, Participant 3 included more detail and used two pieces of A3 paper. Although the drawing was predominately black, he did use a couple of other colors.

Participant 3 drew three evocative images relating to his career choice, involving his 'past,' 'work' and 'future.' Drawn in black, the past was represented by a child wearing a cap with a propeller on top. He was confined in a cage that sat on top of a plane that straddled the earth. Participant 3 provided an illuminating account of himself as a boy who had had to struggle with loneliness and a poor sense of identity between the ages of eight and 18. At eight years of age, he was sent to a boarding school in another country, where he experienced great loneliness: '…I was very different because I had an American accent; so I was on the outside for a very long time. So I really struggled…' Subsequently, he attended many different secondary schools, which only perpetuated his sense of loneliness, as shown in these comments: '…Going to different schools, trying to establish my identity, it was really hard'; and, 'A very lonely, lonely year, trying to get my identity again…'

Adding to this loneliness was a lack of support and love from his father. He described his relationship with his father today as '…still very superficial and we have never ever been able to bridge any gaps…' The keywords Participant 3 used in his narrative when describing his professional life included: *crave stability, fear of change, fear that I will take the easy route as opposed to the right route, strongly independent* and *needing connection with people.*

Equally evocative was Participant 3's representation of 'work' as a man with two heads— one with a happy face and the other with a sad face. The happy side had an arm holding up smiling faces, while the sad side had a ball and chain around its ankle, and was fending off faces with angry expressions, wielding knives. In his accompanying narrative, Participant 3 explained that this image

represented the two sides of his past corporate career: the satisfaction of building and leading his team in Asia and the complete contrast of a corporate headquarters filled with aggressive, narcissistic individuals. Although Participant 3 accepted that there must be both good and bad times when one was working in a corporation, he felt that he had never really been able to assert his true self: 'I am projecting an image, or being what I think I need to be—playing a role that's not fully me.' He pointed out that the red polka dots on the double-headed man's tie expressed 'my desire to be creative, to try and be different from the normal perception of a conservative aggressive corporate senior leader, which I did not see myself as.'

The image of his future was a road splitting into two divergent paths: on one was a smiling corporate figure and on the other was a man flying towards two objects—a lock (representing security) and a basket with eggs (representing wealth). In explaining these images, Participant 3 encapsulated his core professional dilemma: 'Should I take a jump and be an entrepreneur—it's risky—or should I do the safe thing and take the aggressive corporate role?'

Participant 3 felt a strong attachment to the process and his drawings: 'I really enjoyed the process… The key takeaways for me centered around the powerful interconnectedness between the seven elements that are important for me to think about, as I make my next career choice.' He also wanted to share the image with his wife.

Commentary

Reflecting upon Participant 3's drawing and verbal narrative, I identified several themes common to other participants that exerted a significant influence on their next career choices. The effects of parents and family upbringing constituted a strong aspect of the 'heart' and appeared to shape the participants' belief systems about themselves and their current careers. Moreover, all three participants adopted a structured approach to the process by drawing and numbering seven separate

components and describing their self portraits as instructed. During the deconstruction process, I enquired whether following a structure was something they would normally do. They all made clear that structure was very important in their professional lives. Their approach and perceptions about structure made me wonder whether their preference for structure could be potentially limiting their curiosity and willingness to experiment with other possible career choices.

Both Participants 1 and 3 conveyed a very strong sense of ownership about finding their next career; their verbal narratives demonstrated a strong sense of resilience to past career adversity, and a keen urge to move forward to their next career choices. Their commitment to the career choice endeavor was expressed through their signatures, their sense of ownership of the drawings and their desire to keep and share their self-portraits with their wife. In contrast, Participant 2 displayed a lack of enthusiasm for her drawing and appeared to be 'stuck'; furthermore, she did not seem ready to commit to any action in order to become 'unstuck'.

What most distinguished Participant 3's drawing from those of the other two participants was its visually strong and evocative images, conjuring up powerful emotions of fear, anger, frustration, disappointment, loneliness, love and completeness reinforced through his narrative.

Participant 4

Visual content and expressed narrative themes

In dramatic contrast to his peers, Participant 4's self-portrait contained one integrated image, in monochromatic black, placed slightly left of the center of the paper. The outline of a human body was naïve with limited detail: the 'head,' 'heart' and 'gut' were drawn in a highly simplistic way, while the 'past,' 'future,' 'work' and 'leisure' were represented as separate abstract images attached to either an arm or a leg.

Like the other three participants, Participant 4 started his description with the 'heart,' 'head' and 'gut.' He commented that he had drawn 'a big head as he liked to learn and understand things' and 'a big heart as he was a soft person and it was nice to work for him.' In explaining his 'gut' image, he stated that he was 'not a risk-taker.' These three themes—his love of learning, gentle temperament and risk averseness—recurred throughout his verbal description of the self-portrait. Making a specific reference to career choices, Participant 4 asserted, 'In my career choice, my head is my biggest ally, my gut is my biggest hindrance, as I am risk-averse, and my heart is neutral.'

His depiction of his future was expressed as 'a black box, where I hoped there was something in it.' The following excerpt from our discussion of the empty box, which represented his future, offers an illuminating example of Participant 4's sense of paralysis:

Me: 'Are you ok with your box being empty?'

Participant 4: 'No.'

Me: 'If you could draw something in your box, what would it be?'

Participant 4: 'I would've loved to shape a picture of my future, two years ago as I would have drawn an office with desk and my name and put MD next to it, I had a very, very clear view of what I wanted to do…and now I know that I won't be replacing my boss and I have to accept my career won't be what I hoped it would be…' *(Note: his voice expressed a strong sense of anger and frustration.)*

In describing his self portrait, Participant 4 consistently referred to the influences of his upbringing, his schooling opportunities and his mother and grandmother. When asked what he would like to do with his self-portrait he said, 'I would store it.' I wonder now, on reflection, whether this was because it revealed his strongest emotions; anger, disappointment, bitterness and an overall sense of defeatism.

Commentary

In contrast to the others, Participant 4 was at a complete loss about his future self and career, and drew the outline of a box with no bottom. For 13 years, he had dreamed of becoming the managing director of a global financial services company, but had come to accept that this dream would not be fulfilled. When asked about his future he said, '…I have an image of me as a rabbit on the road, freezing …I feel that I am in a freeze moment and I still can't make a decision to fight or flight…'

He firmly held four potentially limiting self-beliefs that dominated his narrative; three of these were directly related to his upbringing. The first was that a career was defined by one's school:

'…Engineering school defines your career and how far you can go… I went to a rubbish school and I wasn't aware how much this would impact my career…'

Second, he had developed a list of behaviors of people who made it to senior leadership positions and another list for those who would only reach middle management. He did not believe people could develop the senior leadership behaviors: you either 'had them or not.' He placed himself in the 'have not' category. What intrigued me was he spoke of his mother as having all the senior management qualities (territorial, very conflictual, takes big risks) and said that these had allowed her to be very successful in her career.

Third, he spoke insistently about his own inability to take risks. He told a very powerful story that his grandmother had told him many years before, which still resonated very strongly:

'My grandmother was a doctor and when she retired she managed the center for the Red Cross and she was telling me how many people she meets always telling her the same story…They have a life accident, divorce or some sort of depression and within two years everything starts to unfold . Within two to three years is all it takes them to end up on the streets. Even if I don't see myself ending up there, I am always conscious it is something that can happen…so I need to plan and anticipate if you want to avoid problem… probably I do too much planning and stops me taking risks I don't deny it.'

Finally, another belief that he continually referred to was to do with age:

'As you age you can less afford to make mistakes. At 40 you're thought of as a senior. This was an article I read when I was 27 years old…How can I place myself in a situation where I won't be fired based on my age?…I'm in a place with a gun behind my head. You can't change your career at 50, you're too old, you can't reinvent yourself. A friend told me, once your age is above 40 it becomes a question, above 45 it becomes a problem—as long as your career has momentum it's ok but the real problem arises when your career hits a plateau. I know I have hit a plateau.'

Based on my analysis, I felt very strongly that these self-beliefs were holding him back in filling in the details of his future life and career story and bringing him to his fullest potential.

Participant 5

Visual content and expressed narrative themes

Although Participant 5 adopted the same approach as Participant 4 in integrating all components into one image, her drawing was vibrant and dynamic, bursting with color and detail. In her overall narrative, she highlighted the four layers in her drawing, starting from the center and then moving outwards in the following sequence: center being the 'self' (images of 'heart,' 'head' and 'gut,' as depicted by fire); community (the people); the world-at-large (the circle around the heart); and lastly, the universe/spirituality (stars).

Positioned at the center of the paper was a red heart whose contours were drawn repeatedly to make its outline look very solid. Accordingly, Participant 5 told the story of her image, starting

from the heart, which was were most participant's started their self portrait verbal narrative. As she

explained: 'My heart is where love and passion is… What I love to do starts from the heart and it

tells the other parts what to do, e.g. the brain, and that's why it is so big.' In her drawing, the 'head'

was connected to the 'heart,' with lines shooting out into the earth: to her, 'the heart and mind must

work together.' At the same time, she pointed out her love for her 'brain': '… as it is here where I

have my intellect and idea generation.' She then linked the 'heart' and 'head' to the 'gut,'

represented by an image of fire that she described as the 'source of passion and energy.' Summing

up these three images with a powerful commentary, Participant 5 stated, 'These three things must be

fully integrated and work together for me to fulfill my career goals and dreams.'

The deep need to connect with diverse people in her life and work was illustrated by the

teeming throng of people she drew in her heart, with different colors representing different cultures,

ensconced within the world.

It is notable that Participant 5 did not draw her past. When asked about her past, she

responded as follows: 'Super workaholic through my entire career, workaholic from day one, when

I stepped out of the school… Actually really driven by success, achievement, and promotions.'

When I enquired about the source of her drive, Participant 5 attributed it to her mother:

> 'My mother was a domineering figure, authoritative figure; so whatever we say has to be
> wrong, it is wrong, she is right. So actually I tend to keep my mouth shut… There is nothing
> much we can do at home. Thus I looked outward at school: I wanted to achieve. Oh it is like,
> there was always something deeper in me. I wanted to show something; [I wanted] to show I
> had some talent. I had this type of peculiar fire: I used to study really, really hard at school,
> excel in the achievements, in the academic records… Yeah, so it was actually a pattern in
> my life.'

In response to my request to describe what she would draw to represent her past, she

countered, 'Why look back? I am determined to look forward, but if I had to draw it, it would have

been no flame, the heart smaller, and the heart would not have been found at the center of the world, as all I had focused on was my job.'

Participant 5 expressed a very strong attachment to her drawing. In fact, she took several photographs of it, intending to share it with friends and to use it as a source for further reflection.

Commentary

With Participant 5, as with Participants 1–4, the verbal narrative of her self-portrait illuminated the significance of her parent and a resultant belief system that influenced her career choice. Like Participant 1, Participant 5 also had a central image in her self-portrait, suggesting her need for balance in every aspect of her life so that she could feel secure. Upon further reflection, I conjectured that this need might have been triggered by her past professional experience, in which her 'heart,' 'head' and 'gut,' as well as 'leisure' and 'work,' were totally out of balance, resulting in significant health problems that forced her to leave her previous professional career.

What truly distinguishes Participant 5's work is her incorporation of colors in her integrated image. Through her colorful and vibrant drawing, I sensed that Participant 5 felt a real sense of freedom and opportunity in her current state of career transition; this matched her person— energetic, smiling, excited and optimistic. Moreover, her integrated picture seemed to suggest that she had a level of completeness in her understanding of what she wanted her next career to look like. Similarly, in her spoken narrative, Participant 5 presented a career picture that integrated elements of self, community, earth and spiritual elements. The centralized position of the image of the heart—its relatively large size and vibrant colors, along with the reinforcement of its contours— clearly indicated that the 'heart' was central to her career choice. In the past, her 'head' had driven her career choices, leading to a major health breakdown.

In deliberately deciding not to represent her past, I wondered whether Participant 5 was expressing a decisive break from her past: essentially, she had *finally* stepped away from her mother's dark shadow and was making career choices based on what was important to her. Freed from her past, she was able to create a picture that burst with colors and exuded optimism, reflecting her sense of freedom and exhilaration.

Finally, as with Participants 1 and 3, Participant 5 displayed a strong attachment to the process and image. She stated her connection to the process and its associated feelings and themes: 'I really treasure today's opportunity to draw.' It would seem that this drawing validated her thinking, thus affirming that her next career choice was right for her.

Participant 6

Visual content and expressed narrative themes

Participant 6's self-portrait was integrated into an overall framework that she explained was a game board. The central image in her portrait was a die: the three faces showed images of her 'heart,'

'head' and 'gut.' Like the other two participants who drew strong central images, Participant 6 seemed to have a strong desire to strive for balance between work, family, and personal well-being in an endeavor to feel secure.

She started verbally describing her self-portrait with what she called 'the start of the game'—a red arrow representing her past:

> '…The past is the past and I am very focused on looking forward. My career has not been straightforward: I've tried this, I've tried this and I've tried this—all different—and therefore, I can't rely on the past much…'

Like Participant 2, she drew an image that stood for her future (a checkered flag) but did not include detail or a clear vision.

> '… don't know, that's why I did not paint anything other than the flag. The flag is representing for me the future but first I thought I should have put a sun or something like that there and then I felt, "NO," because I actually don't know where I want to go. I don't know. That's why I wanted to have up here at this level no picture and I don't know yet what exactly what the future is going to be…'

Commentary

Once again, the recurrent theme of the influence of upbringing and parents and the resultant impact on career choices emerged strongly. Participant 6 shared the story of her parents' separation: her mother, at the age of 50, had to find a job to financially support her and her siblings. It was an incredibly tough time for the mother and children, working hard and eventually building a career. Thus it is little wonder that one of her expressed core values was financial independence, or that this had driven her previous career decisions. However, she was beginning to feel that focusing on financial independence was holding her back; although she was unfulfilled in her current role, it provided solid financial remuneration. Letting that go to pursue her own business idea was proving to be very hard.

Like Participants 1 and 3, she spoke about childhood adversity and how this had shaped her and impacted her career. Participant 6 is dyslexic and remembers being taken out of school as a child to attend a different school:

> 'So, I had to go away from school which was really difficult for me because I felt that I'm different and at that time I didn't want to be different, I wanted to be exactly the same like everyone else and I had to go away from school. So, that actually impacted me quite a bit... So, yeah, I felt that something is wrong with me. So, I had actually a huge impact at me at that time…'

She went on to explain that this feeling of being different drove her to show others that she 'could make it' and that she 'could win,' which continues to be part of who she is today. Thus her childhood deficit led to the development of a strong need for independence and success.

Like Participants 2 and 4, she was unable to articulate a vision for her future. In contrast to the others, however, she seemed empowered rather than encumbered by this. When asked how she felt about not having a vision for her future, she replied, 'I am very comfortable with that. Right now I feel there is something exciting around the corner, I just don't know what it is.'

Like Participants 1, 3 and 5, Participant 6 appeared fully committed to and engaged in the process, keen to share her self-portrait with her husband and to use it as a source of reflection to assist her in making her next career choice.

Participant 7

Participant 8
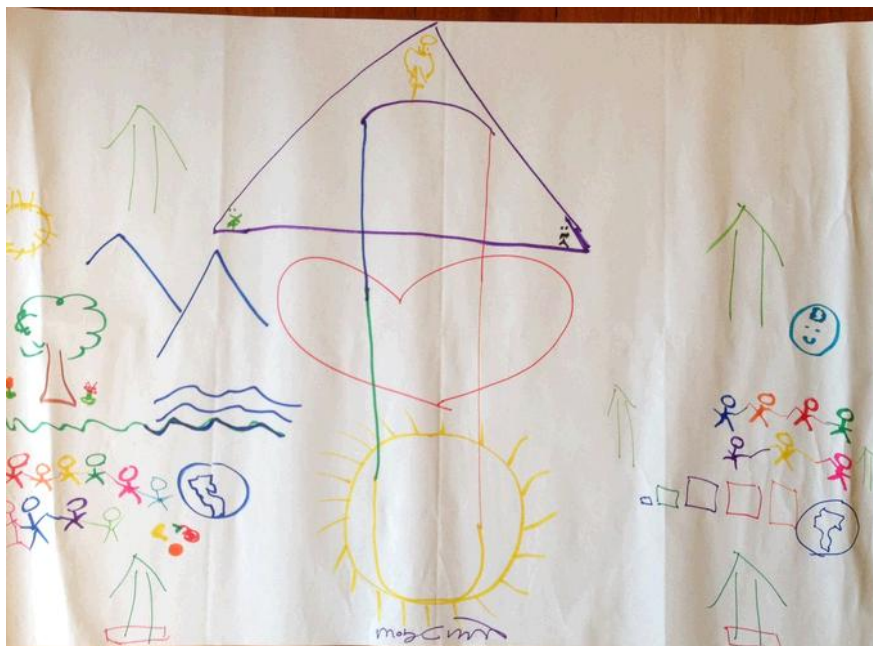
Commentary

Participant 7 & 8's self portrait reinforced a number of the visual and verbal narrative themes captured with the other six participants.

This included the expressed need, both through drawing and verbal narrative to have the elements of heart, head and gut aligned in their next career choice. Participant 8 described it as:

> 'Before I only typically thought, what does the head say, I'm a finance person. Now I ask my gut, i.e. my intuition, what does that say, And now it's also about how I feel about it. So now I am always checking in my head, the heart and the gut, constantly checking with those, and try to find balance with all those aspects...'

Similarly to other participants, Participant 7 & 8, when describing their drawings of the past spoke of influences from parents and upbringing that had significantly impacted their career choices, both positively and negatively.

Furthermore Participant 8's image of the future was of arrows pointing into empty white space, which similarly to Participant 2 & 4 appeared to reflect an inability to narrate her future and created an anxiety, a sense of helplessness and lack of focus in actions needed to assist her in career choice. In contrast Participant 7 drew and described a very detailed, positive and powerful image of her future, which similarly to Participant 1 & 3 appeared to manifest itself positively in the individual as she too, appeared empowered, focused and energized by the process of making their next career choice.

Discussion

As the eight participants revealed, unpacked and re-authored the stories of their self-portraits, I discovered that, while they all had their own unique past, present, and future stories pertaining to their careers, four main themes emerged.

1. The Impact of Upbringing on Career Choice

Although participants were not specifically asked to draw their families, it was evident during the process of co-construction that followed the self-portrait drawing exercise, that upbringing, in particular parents, had a significant influence on all the participants' career choices. The images of the 'heart' and the 'past' typically led to unencumbered revelations about the participants' upbringing and parents. Having suffered adversity in childhood, Participants 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8 all developed an incredibly strong desire to succeed professionally. In addition, Participants 1, 3 and 6 grew up feeling that they were different (due to poverty, dyslexia and constant relocation). Perceiving that they occupied the 'fringes' of their peer groups, they were driven to pursue corporate careers, proving to others that they could be successful. My analysis is reflected in the following comments:

> *[Participant 1]:* 'I was always trying to outdo my peers, and when I outdid them, I would find next competitors.'

> *[Participant 6]:* 'So, I didn't get to the top. And basically that was for me… I can't believe it… I'm going to show you that I can make it. I didn't want to take that feeling that I had when I didn't win to get to the top and use it to drive me.'

> *[Participant 8]:* 'I had a very difficult childhood. My parents did the best they could. I wasn't taught the things that I felt I needed to be taught. So I went out and learnt it and did it myself.'

Another significant career attitude that stemmed from upbringing was a fierce need for independence in the workplace. All three participants (1, 3 and 6) shared past stories of extreme unhappiness and dissatisfaction when they did not have autonomy or freedom in the workplace. Yet while their stories demonstrated their need for independence, they also captured a desire for high levels of recognition (not necessarily monetary) for their work. The absence of such recognition often constituted a huge source of professional disappointment for them. A new connection was made for Participants 1 and 3; they realized that their need for independence might be discouraging the C-suite from giving them recognition on another level. Acknowledging that both independence and recognition were critical in their career environment, these participants left the session reflecting on how they could secure both independence and recognition in their next career.

In contrast, Participants 2 and 4 expressed expectations and beliefs acquired in childhood, which, whether conscious or unconscious, might be holding them back. Participant 2's story indicated that she felt constrained by family expectations: 'I have part of my past, my family being… expecting concrete careers… if you are in a serious law firm.' Participant 4 felt that he was limited because he had attended 'the wrong school and university.' Although he was only 40 years old, he perceived himself as being 'too old to recreate [his] career.' His very low appetite for any level of risk, reinforced by a very powerful story his grandmother had told him, appeared to create a state of paralysis. Through their narratives, these participants expressed deep unhappiness and frustration with their current careers. Although the self-portrait process and co-construction and deconstruction dialogues revealed the adverse influence of their upbringings, both continued to seem stuck and unable to shift their limiting beliefs.

Conclusion 1: the use of the self-portrait projective drawing can stimulate a meaningful narrative on the impact of upbringing in career choice.

Forging Meaningful Connections

In the self-portrait activity, participants were instructed to draw seven elements: 'heart,' 'head,' 'gut,' 'past,' 'future,' 'leisure' and 'work'. Regardless of whether they drew seven separate images or one integrated image, the majority of the participants began the co-construction process by discussing each element separately. It was through the deconstruction process of the visual structure, which included the examination of the underlying reasons for overlapping images and their positioning (close together or far apart), that multiple connections and associations were discovered. These revelations helped to contribute to the participants' understanding of their inner selves, necessary for making the right career choice (Green, 1999).

In the case of most participants, images of the past and future were drawn on opposite sides of the paper, as disconnected and thus separate entities. Through the deconstruction process, some participants were able to recognize that they were in fact interconnected. This shift in perspective enabled them to begin constructing a potentially new story for their future careers. Career stories 'tell how the self of yesterday becomes the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow' (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). For example, Participant 7 drew a very detailed and happy picture of her future (many colors and smiling faces), with herself standing proud on a raised mound. She described this image of her 'future' as:

> 'My future self that I aspire to is a girl that is confident, that is proud, that is shining, yeah, and that she is confident and, yeah, I can manifest through her acting on stage, she's training in class or teaching something and people are listening and are interested and they're happy…'

Her image of her past (drawn in dark monochrome, with serious faces) provoked a feeling of anxiety, compliance and uncertainty. She described this as:

> 'I'm Japanese and spent my life pleasing people, but sometimes I would get triggered and it would shock people and sometimes in the work context that's bad because then they see too totally opposite side, extremely kind, soft, gentle, withdrawn and like extremely angry, bitchy, mean. I'm trying to find a way to be more myself.'

During the deconstruction phase, we explored how her past narrative could be linked to her future narrative and there was a delicate moment when she acknowledged that the characteristically 'Japanese' personality that she was trying hard to deny might give her an advantage in realizing her future career.

Three images that often overlapped or were positioned closely together were the 'heart,' 'head' and 'gut.' Interestingly, once the participants had described each of these elements individually, they would have a moment of enlightenment and see how all three elements were interconnected. This emphasized the need to acknowledge all three 'voices' in their quest for the right career. For many participants, the 'head' had played a dominant role in past career choices, a strategy that was no longer working for them. In future, they would need to rely on the 'heart,' the center of emotions including passion, happiness, fulfillment, satisfaction and contentment:

> *[Participant 5]*: 'What I love to do starts from the heart and it tells the other parts what to do, for example the brain, and that's why [the image of the heart] is so big.'
>
> *[Participant 2]*: 'If your heart is full, you're happy, you're balanced, life is in order. Things around you [start] working well and people are happy.'
>
> *[Participant 1]*: 'I draw my heart to be fairly big and it's constantly, you know, pumping and beating. That's what makes me live.'
>
> *[Participant 8]*: 'And so I have tried to balance the heart and the gut, in size to each other, because I think they deserve rebuilding. The head is slightly bigger, because I know myself, and I tend to live in my head, but I know the heart and the gut are just as important.'

Their comments support the literature, which highlights the rising trend of individuals seeking psychological success in their careers—working to achieve a deep sense of happiness, passion, fulfillment, balance and peace.

The drawings, supported by the narratives, also yielded insights about the *lack* of connection between 'leisure' and 'work' and the dramatic contrast between images of 'leisure' and 'work.' On the one hand, 'leisure' was represented by detailed and often colorful drawings accompanied by passionate stories about a wide range of activities from movie-watching to sports and family time. Participants clearly experienced personal enjoyment, freedom of choice and unobligated time in their leisure activities. On the other hand, 'work' was often depicted in a monochromatic dark color, with companion stories of frustration, negativity and unhappiness.

Through the deconstruction process, both the participants and I explored whether the positive emotions they experienced during leisure could be extended into the work realm, or whether leisure and work could overlap. Although nothing concrete emerged from these discussions, they did ignite my interest in an increasingly important issue in the field of career management: can the 'work self' and 'ideal self' merge into one, when the divide between these two selves still seems very wide? As a detailed analysis of this issue falls outside the scope of this thesis, I would point readers to a growing body of research studies that have sought to examine the relationship between work and leisure in career management. (Edwards & Bloland, 1990; Srebalus, Marinelli, & Messing, 1982; Zunker, 2006)

Conclusion 2: the self-portrait projective drawing can enable participants to identify meaningful connections and associations between experiences and feelings, which might have seemed disconnected. This new understanding provides important insights for the career decision-making process.

Pictorial Images of the Future and Implications

'The basic subject of career counseling is a person's future' (Cochran, 1997; p. 1). Although the future has not yet happened, the client needs to anticipate and create various scenarios. Those participants who drew colorful and/or very detailed images of their futures were able to articulate a powerful vision for their future selves, even if they had faced adversity, disappointments, setbacks and a lack of fulfillment in their past and present careers. For example, Participants 1 and 3 had both recently experienced significant setbacks in their careers. Both had held senior leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies. Participant 1 had unexpectedly been made redundant, while Participant 3 had chosen to leave due to the CEO's aggressiveness and intimidation, which he had found unacceptable. Among all the images in their self-portraits, their images of the future were the most positive; these in turn, were supported by narratives characterized by confidence, passion and commitment. It was as though they were 'writing' their futures. Although they did not identify definite actions to take to launch their next careers, Participants 1 and 3 both felt empowered by the insights they had gained. They were active participants in creating a vision, an image, a narrative for their future.

By contrast, the images of the future produced by Participants 2, 4, 6 and 8 lacked detail, which was mirrored in their narratives. These participants seemed to be in a state of paralysis; despite concerns about their future, they were unable to picture it.

> *[Participant 6]*: 'But actually, I don't know yet… Is it going to be something I do by myself? Maybe building something for someone else, helping someone else build something, or working with someone to do something? I don't know. That's why I wanted to have it up here at this level with no detailed picture, as I don't know yet exactly what the future is going to be.'

> *[Participant 2]*: '…and my goal is to be inspired and to be interested in what I am doing and sort of wake up… and I mean a dream … the dream, what everybody wants, I want to go to work, you know I want to have that and I know, I know it's possible so … but I just don't know how to do it.'

[Participant 8]: 'Although I am excited about the future, I am also concerned… I know I have a lot to contribute. I just don't know how to go about it, as I don't know how I am viewed… I have predominately done volunteer NGO work for many years. I'm out of the box and someone needs to take a chance on me.'

[Participant 4]: 'The image of my future is me as a rabbit on the road, freezing, I feel that I am in a freeze moment and I still can't make a decision to fight or flight.'

These participants seemed like spectators, sitting on the sidelines of their life stories. As Cochran says, 'One's path has become tangled, and the way is no longer clear' (Cochran, 1997; p. 9).

In the career narrative approach, the past and present are important, but it is not enough to simply recount events; rather, one must able to connect and integrate past events into a meaningful future career story that can be lived.

Conclusion 3: self-portrait projective drawing can help participants to construct a meaningful future career story that empowers them and encourages personal responsibility to take action and live out their career choice. When a future career narrative is absent, the individual appears disempowered—'stuck'—and unable to move forward in creating a meaningful career and life.

The Significance of Structural Interpretations of Projective Drawings

During the deconstruction phase of the narrative process, I analyzed the self-portraits using a structural interpretation that included color, placement, size and shading (Hammer, 1958; Leibowitz, 1999). It is important to note that I used this framework in the most rudimentary fashion,

as I am not a trained art therapist. To supplement my analysis, I sought confirmation or rejection from the participants' own interpretations of their drawings. Combining the structural interpretation and enquiry process produced some interesting insights.

Size

When considering the element of size, two images were particularly arresting. Participant 1 drew a large image of a river, representing work. This image dominated his picture. When I enquired about the size of the river, he replied, 'It was not conscious, but now I look at it, it does dominate the picture. Let me think about that.' Large size can indicate a constrictive and frustrating environment. Out of all the participants in the study, Participant 1 expressed most forcefully a sense of tension and constriction. He felt pressured to secure a job that provided high financial gain, and might otherwise have gone in a different direction:

> 'If I had absolute freedom maybe I would have been a doctor, you know. I think there's some creativity there, an inventor… you know, in creating and developing things. I think actually, you know, that would have potentially been more fun for me. So that's probably the only regret I got looking back. I've got great opportunities, I think, you know, hell I'd be out there designing the next phone or whatever, stuff like that maybe. I'd enjoy it a lot more.'

> Furthermore, he expressed deep personal frustration about his current lack of a career:

> 'I've never felt sorry for myself in the past, ever, and, you know, over the past four to five years I catch myself feeling sorry for myself at times and that bothers me. Like, "Oh! How's that? What's that?" And, "Get over it and move on." But at times I felt, you know, that… that I haven't been handed a good card in recent times and that's disturbing.'

Participant 2 drew a very small image of her 'past,' in comparison to the rest of her self-portrait images. Her past was a large stick figure (representing a boss) over several very small stick figures (representing the workers and including herself). During the deconstruction phase, I enquired about the size of her drawing and whether it provoked any feelings in her she would like to

speak about. She responded that she doesn't ever see herself as a boss because she needs direction. No further insights were gained. Analyzing her verbal narrative, what came out very strongly was her feeling of inadequacy in creating a new career—she mentioned many times that she needed help, needed to be pushed, needed someone to hold her hand and didn't know what to do. This puzzled me, as in the past she had driven a number of very successful career changes.

Placement

Participants 1, 5 and 6 placed an object in the exact center of their paper: a river, a heart and a die respectively. 'An exact center placement evokes a feeling of rigidity, of needing to have everything exactly balanced in order to feel secure' (Leibowitz, 1999, p. 28), I explored this idea with Participants 5 and 6, and this led to some insights. Participant 5 spoke about her major medical breakdown as the result of work:

> 'Because I was basically very, very overworked, terrible, but to me, working is my professional training, to me overwork still doesn't matter, so long as I can still produce results. I already felt there are some concerns about my health, but I kept working... Even bigger signal of health situation, which took me another half a year to recover from. It was already too big, it really threatened my life.'

As a result of this very difficult experience, she was making a major transition that was clearly visible in her self-portrait. She had come to understand that her heart should be central to decision-making, influencing and balancing her head, gut, work, leisure and future:

> 'I've come to this stage—it is about integration of a lot of different things. It has to start from the heart and then tell the other parts what to do. So that is the reason why [the heart] is big. It is big, it's the center of my picture.'

Participant 6 gave the central spot to a die with three faces that showed images of her heart, head and gut. The central image on the die was the heart. Exploring this with Participant 6, it was

evident that she was experiencing high anxiety as her need for balance across family, self, husband and work was not being met; our discussion revealed that all were in a state of extreme imbalance. Although she had recently been promoted at work (very important as a recognition of her contributions) imbalance was affecting her marriage, health, happiness and relationship with her children. In this session, she clearly recognized her need to find balance; she was strongly influenced by the die in the center of her self- portrait. (Note: after the study was finished, Participant 6 resigned from her job; she describes feeling more balance in her life.)

I also want to comment on the placement of Participant's 4 image, as this was the only drawing in which most of the right-hand side of the paper was empty, the image being positioned left of the vertical midline. Leibowitz interprets this placement as representing a self-soothing emotional state. The participant needed past experiences to achieve calm. This interpretation interested me particularly in relation to Participant 4, who continued to hold many beliefs from his past. I sensed that these provided approval for and vindication of his present and future life.

Colors

Two participants chose colors that closely reflected their mental state at the time of our interview. Participant 5's self-portrait was an explosion of color. Through her self-portrait, she described her life as the story of an individual who had experienced significant adversity and used it to begin a journey of personal and professional transformation. She conveyed energy, inspiration, excitement and optimism about how she was feeling today and for her future. The use of five colors can promote a sense of affective freedom (Leibowitz, 1999). I asked her how she saw her self-portrait and she replied, 'It is energetic, lively, full, and colorful and that's how I feel at the moment.'

In contrast, Participant 4's self-portrait was drawn in monochromatic black. He firmly held a number of beliefs that he spoke about with a sense of fait accompli; these created a sense of being

absolutely stuck. 'With regards to the whole object, if only one color is used, the subjective sense that is evoked is one of limited affective involvement vis-à-vis what the objective represents—a feeling of constriction' (Leibowitz, 1999 pp. 29–30). Throughout our interview, I felt a strong sense of bitterness and dissatisfaction. As he had not gone to the 'right' university, his career aspirations were severely limited. This early belief continued to constrict his view of his professional abilities.

Conclusion 4: the incorporation of the structural interpretation of a self-portrait projective drawing during the deconstruction phase of a narrative coaching session can provide some new insights for clients.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

As I interacted with each participant only briefly, it would be over-ambitious to conclude that projective drawing always elicits unconscious materials related to career choice. However, it is reasonable to search for possible clues, which could lead to more substantial investigations in future career coaching sessions. The four themes I have identified are not all-inclusive; research using a larger sample size over longer interactions could uncover other themes.

In a therapeutic environment, it has been shown that a temporal approach to projective drawings can provide powerful insights, as clients themselves comment on differences and similarities in their drawings. This has been applied within INSEAD's EMBA program, where students are asked to draw self-portraits at the beginning of the program and then again after approximately 6–9 months. They explore the differences and similarities in their drawings and verbal narratives. By coincidence, one of the participants on this research had undergone this process as a student of INSEAD's EMBA and she spoke of the 'profound difference in her

drawing.' Considering that the context of one's career choice can evolve over a period of time, through ongoing discovery and experimentation, conducting the projective drawing exercise several times could enhance the effectiveness of this tool in the career choice process.

The findings of my research study also raised another interesting question that could be pursued further: do clients follow through on the future chapters of their stories that they began to author during the narrative career coaching session? McIlveen & Patton (2007) have shown that narrative has an interdependent relationship with action. Conducting a longer-term study that followed participants' actual career development would cast light on the impact of the projective drawing activity—to what extent does it move participants from intent to action?

Another topic that emerged from the projective drawings and verbal narratives was the impact of upbringing on the participants' past, present and future career choices. Most had been driven onto a specific career path that was creating dissatisfaction. Some were conscious of this connection and accepted and worked with it, while others seemed unconscious and appeared stuck and frustrated. Because the family narrative plays a powerful role in career choice—and projective drawing is a key clinical approach used in family therapy—I believe the role of comprehensive exploration of family in career coaching merits further investigation.

Conclusion

Today individuals are seeking careers that provide meaning, fulfillment and alignment with personal values and goals. Coach counseling is embracing this change in careers by incorporating the use of narratives, as storytelling is a primary way to make meaning of our past, present and future lives. The narrative approach involves the co-construction, deconstruction and construction of one's life story, to reveal, unpack and re-author respectively. The inclusion of projective drawing

as part of the narrative career-coaching framework has a great deal of potential. Introducing an alternative means of personal expression, in this case the self-portrait, offers the perspective of a new creative, visual and reflective process through which to develop the vision and inspiration to build one's future self and career. Although further research is encouraged to build on these findings, my initial study shows that there is certainly a place for projective drawing in the career-coaching framework. The late Robert Nozick, a preeminent professor in philosophy at Harvard University, may have seen the significance of the self-portrait back in 1989, when he wrote, in *The Examined Life*, 'The understanding gained in examining a life itself comes to permeate that life and direct its course. To live an examined life is to make a self- portrait' (Nozick, 1989 p. 12).

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Appendix 1: Participants' Questionnaire

Question 1

Tell me about your career journey to date. Include times when you were most fulfilled in your career and why and times you were dissatisfied and why.

Question 2

Explain what criteria and/or processes you have used in the past when you have changed roles in your career. Were any of these particularly useful and why? In reflection was anything missing in your criteria and/or processes that may have encouraged a different decision and outcome?

Question 3

Thinking about the career change you are focusing on today:

- What has triggered this change?

- How much choice do you feel you have in making a change?

- How are you currently going about it?

- What is helping/working for you?

- Are you facing any barriers?

- How are you feeling about the process?

Question 4

What do you see as your *ideal self* or what you want out of life and the person you want to be? What is stopping you from achieving this ideal? To what extent is your proposed career transition

going to contribute to getting closer to this ideal self? Do you have a strategy/plan or is it more of an ad hoc approach?

Question 5

Whose career do you admire and why? Whom, career wise, do you slightly envy and why? Who would you like to model and why?

Question 6

And finally—anything else you would like to share? For example, your experience and feelings while reflecting and writing answers to these questions, relating to your career past, present and future?