

The Use of a Story Completion Method in Career Counselling

Norman E. Amundson

University of British Columbia

Résumé

Cette article explore l'utilisation d'une méthode de "achèvement d'une histoire" dans le contexte d'orientation professionnelle pour aider les client(e)s à identifier et clarifier leurs valeurs et leurs stratégies de résoudre leurs problèmes. Plusieurs situations sont présentées qui peuvent s'utiliser par des adultes et par des jeunes. L'utilisation de cette méthode met l'accent sur la flexibilité et sur la collaboration dans les limites d'un format structuré de l'entrevue professionnelle.

Abstract

This paper explores how a story completion method can be used in career counselling to help clients identify and clarify their values and problem solving strategies. A series of situations are presented for use with youth and adults. In using the approach there is an emphasis on flexibility and collaboration within a structured interviewing format.

I have been interested for some time with the way in which clients put into action the insights and information they have acquired through various career exploration tasks. Tiedeman (1961) has described the decision making process in terms of (a) anticipation and (b) implementation and adjustment. This basic structure has served as a foundation for later theorists (Gordon, 1981; Keller, Biggs, & Gysbers, 1982) describing the developmental nature of decision making (Hazler & Roberts, 1984). According to Tiedeman (1961), in the anticipation phase there is wide ranging exploration leading to the identification of alternatives and the formulation of initial choices. Following this, individuals implement their choices and make adjustments according to the realities of the environment. This process is ongoing and continues throughout life.

The focus of this paper is upon the use of a story completion method to facilitate a smoother transition from anticipation to implementation. With this approach there is the attempt to identify values and problem solving strategies of clients through a story completion task and to use this information to formulate more realistic action plans.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The story completion method was first conceptualized by Thomas (1937), but did not really become established in North America until it was taken up again by Komisar (1949), Mills (1954), and Sargent (1953).

Perhaps the most influential work of this latter group was the Insight Test developed by Sargent (1953). This technique consisted of a series of brief descriptions of conflict situations. The client was required to elaborate upon each situation orally or in written form in terms of what would likely happen and why and how the person would be feeling in the situation. The topic areas which were probed included conflicts in familial, opposite sex, interpersonal (social and friendship), vocational, religious, and health relations.

The story completion method as outlined by Sargent (1953) seemed to offer considerable promise as a means of identifying and evaluating values and problem solving strategies used by clients in career decision making. The range of problems described by her, however, was too broad for use in career counselling and thus a revised list of more occupationally related situations was developed by the author for use with youth and adults.

ADMINISTRATION OF STORY COMPLETION FORMS

With this task a client is asked to imagine him/herself in the given situations and complete the story endings by indicating what would likely happen and how they would feel about it. Due to the length of time necessary to complete the task, counsellors often prefer to assign only about one-third of the situations. The situations can be selected by a counsellor or can be chosen by the client depending on the circumstances. If a client selects the situations there should be some inquiry about the reasons for making the selections.

The completion of the various stories may be done during a counselling situation or assigned for homework. In situations where some difficulty is suspected in terms of written expression, it is advisable to have the form completed during the session. Under these circumstances the counsellor can do the writing while the client dictates the responses. Aside from this rather special circumstance, the forms are usually assigned for completion outside the counselling session.

The situations which have been used with adults are as follows:

Adult situations

1. You have spent hours preparing a special project. There have been rumours, however, that your boss is disappointed in the results. Your boss has just finished looking it over and has called you to come into his office.
2. You have been working on a team project for some time. You come to work and find that you have been transferred to another department.
3. You are looking for work and are offered two similar jobs with the same salary. One job requires considerable travelling while the other one does not.

4. There has just been a cut-back in employees and you have been given your termination notice.
5. You have been looking for work for 6 weeks and just haven't been able to come up with anything satisfactory.
6. You have been working on a job training program for almost three years. The final exams are only six months away, but you feel like forgetting the whole thing and trying another career.
7. Your parents (or spouse) have counted on the fact that you will attend college. You have enrolled in a program but aren't really sure that this is what you want.
8. You have chosen a career and are now enrolled in the training program. After the first set of examinations you are informed that your marks are not good enough to continue.
9. You enjoy your work but find that it leaves you very little time for leisure activities.
10. A friend approaches you about a promising business venture. If you decide to take advantage of this opportunity you will have to quit your job and invest all of your savings.
11. You get married while attending a training program and after graduation begin your career. (Females) Soon afterwards you discover that you are pregnant. (Males) Soon afterwards your wife becomes pregnant.
12. You have hopes of becoming a professional tennis player. Unfortunately you are involved in a serious car accident and lose one of your arms before you can realize your dream.
13. You want to take a special training course and it is only available in another province. You are undecided about leaving because you have good friends here and are very close to your family.
14. You can't make up your mind as to what job you want to pursue. You are now in a position where you will have to make a decision.
15. You love drawing and are quite good at it. You would like to try your hand at being an artist but realize that this is rather risky. You are also considering an attractive offer to become a commercial artist.
16. You have been offered a fantastic employment opportunity in another city. Your spouse is happy with his/her job here, however, and isn't too keen about moving.
17. You have always wanted to become a farmer but just haven't had enough money to buy the necessary land and equipment. You have a very good job, but just can't seem to get farming off your mind.
18. Create your own problem situation.

For youth, the following situations have been used:

Youth Situations

1. You have been working on a group project for some time. You come to class and the teacher suddenly moves you to another group.
2. Your father (mother) has just been offered a better job in a different city.
3. You have tried out for an athletic team and have gained a regular spot on the team. After a few games the coach decides to replace you with a player from the 'B' team.
4. Your teacher has just handed out an assignment in which you can either work alone or in a group.
5. You are a grade ten student who enjoys working as a groom for race horses, but are not really interested in making this a career. You are trying to decide whether you should continue doing this during the summer months or look for a more serious part-time job.
6. You have been looking for work for six weeks and just haven't been able to come up with anything satisfactory.
7. You have hopes of becoming a professional tennis player. Unfortunately you are involved in a serious car accident and lose one of your arms before you can realize your dreams.
8. You have just moved into a new class. The teacher asks the students to break into groups of four or five for an assignment. Everyone gets into their groups and you are left standing alone.
9. You have spent hours studying for an exam. When you get the results back you find that you did very poorly.
10. During an exam one of your friends passes you a note and asks for the answer to a certain question.
11. You have been involved in a serious car accident and end up with some scars on your face. When you return to school you notice that people are staring at you and are calling you names behind your back.
12. Several of your friends have approached you about running for a position on the school executive.
13. Your friend's father goes out of his way to get you a summer job. Just before you begin, you are offered another job that pays more and is more interesting.
14. Your parents have counted on the fact that you will attend college. You have enrolled in the right courses but aren't really sure that this is what you want.
15. You have had some difficulty in your summer job and when you come to work discover that you have been fired.

16. You are an only child and your parents run a successful business. It has always been expected that you would be a partner in the family business. You are now in grade twelve. You are sure that you don't want to be a part of the business, but aren't sure what other careers you might enjoy better.
17. You are graduating from grade twelve and want to do some travelling. You have saved money and have decided to take a year off to travel in Europe and the Mideast. Your parents are opposed to this plan and would prefer that you continue your schooling.
18. Create your own problem situation.

INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The interpretation phase is characterized more by hypothesis formation than by predictive diagnosis. The development of suitable hypothesis begins with a preliminary analysis of the stories that have been generated. Initially, the stories are reviewed quickly and any general trends are noted. Following this, each response is scrutinized with regard to the general story content and the feelings attributed to the characters. The situations have been structured to touch upon issues such as self concept, relationships with others (family, peers, authority figures), orientation towards work (job satisfaction, level of commitment, attitude towards training, industry and initiative), and future expectations.

Other details which can be revealing include repetitions, unusual responses (particularly with reference to feelings), elaborations—additional details which are added, evaluations—use of phrases such as “one *should* always . . .”, and qualifications—statements suggesting reservations such as “but if . . .”. This information often serves to identify key issues for further discussion.

To conclude the evaluation of the individual stories, an assessment of the problem solving strategies of the leading characters is essential. In order to achieve this goal a number of dimensions need to be considered. The first is the extent to which an internal or external orientation is reflected. Does the character feel that his/her behaviour is determined by other people or events (external) or is there a sense of directing one's own path (internal)? The second dimension focuses upon whether the strategy indicates a carefully constructed, logical, and systematic orientation or a certain impulsivity and randomness. Finally, one must consider the degree of flexibility or dominance of the problem solving strategy. Using a flexible approach there probably would be a number of qualifiers and the emphasis would be upon several means to the desired end. With a dominant orientation the client would perceive only one way of handling each situation. In determining a client's orientation towards problem solving it may be useful to ask a few additional questions to confirm preliminary hunches. For example, a client might

be asked if he/she can think of any other way of solving the problem or certain additional barriers might be created and the client could be requested to develop additional stories based on the new information.

Using a traditional assessment approach the interpretation process would often stop at this point. The counsellor would develop certain insights from the tasks completed and this would be used as the basis for future decision making. The approach that is being developed here, however, relies upon a second step where the counsellor and client work together in a collaborative relationship to assess the information (Amundson, 1979). The client is encouraged to become actively involved in the process and has the opportunity to provide his/her own interpretations and to respond to the hypotheses which have been formulated.

In the initial stages of the collaborative interpretation the counsellor is nondirective and encourages the client to discuss the stories by considering how they relate to things they have done in the past and how they show what they are like as persons. Following this initial exploration and clarification process, the counsellor becomes more directive and brings to the attention of the client aspects of the material that seem particularly relevant.

As the counsellor goes through the various hypotheses it is important that links between the various segments of information previously gathered be made. A counsellor statement such as the following reflects this orientation:

This story seems to point to a separation between you and people in authority. In many ways it seems similar to what we discussed earlier. I wonder how this might be interfering with your present job search.

These links help establish the major themes which will affect further decision making.

In many respects the counselling process that is being described closely parallels other commonly used forms of counselling intervention. For example, the counsellor must have respect for the client, be willing to listen and be perceived as being genuine. He/she must also be able to use the skills that this basic orientation implies, i.e., attending, paraphrasing, summarizing, etc. (Egan, 1975).

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Background

Bob is articulate, humorous, and obviously quite intelligent. He is thirty-two years old, married with one young child (nine months). He dropped out of high school and has worked on and off as a paint salesman, as part owner of a magazine stand in a print shop. His major interests are poetry, writing, and meditation and it is within this context that he describes himself. Bob's wife, Sophia, is also very intelligent and shares similar interests. She attended university but did not complete her

degree. She has been working for a number of years in a variety of secretary-receptionist positions. When their child was born they decided to reverse the usual parenting roles. She continued working while he stayed home with their child.

Reason for Referral

Both Bob and his wife are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the decision they made when their child was born. He does not enjoy staying home as the houseparent and she would like to quit her job and be with her child on a full time basis. In addition to this he indicated that he would like further direction regarding what type of job would be most suitable. In the past he has accepted any form of employment and discovered that after a few months the job was uninteresting and usually offered little challenge.

Although Bob and Sophia would like an immediate change in the situation, they realize that realistically she cannot quit her job until she fulfills her current obligations (in four months time). Rather than despairing about the current circumstances, Bob feels that he can use this lead time to benefit from some career counselling.

Counselling Sequence

The first two counselling sessions were primarily exploratory and led to the establishment of several different goals. An emphasis was placed on action and this involved such tasks as organizing his study and resuming his writing. Bob was encouraged to begin doing something concrete with his writing, namely looking into free lance possibilities. In addition, Bob was referred to a career resource centre to acquire additional occupational data and information related to job search. Within this context the story completion form was administered. In view of the move toward action, it seemed advisable to focus upon his problem solving style.

Bob was given the story completion form and asked to select about six of the questions and complete them as part of a homework assignment. When he brought the assignment back he indicated that he enjoyed doing the task and had completed all but four of the questions. He stated that he could see himself in every question that he answered. Although he did not respond to the last question where he was to create his own story, he brought with him several short stories and poems that he had written earlier.

Preliminary Analysis

The basic themes seemed to emerge within the first eight stories and thus, due to space limitations, these are all that are described.

1. You have spent hours preparing a special project. There have been rumours, however, that your boss is disappointed in the results. Your boss had just finished looking it over and has called you to come into his office.

Response

- a) the boss would tell me he liked it or he didn't and we would discuss it. If the project was not done well i can only assume i had too little time or i wasn't really qualified to do it to begin with.
- b) i'd feel quite apprehensive. i am usually on my best behaviour (my most conservative) when in front of the boss and somewhat defensive because i feel bosses generally try to be a bit overly tough.

Tentative Hypotheses: In terms of style, what stands out immediately is the fact that Bob does not use capital letters. He seems to be making a statement about self or process through this format and this could be discussed further. In the story one gets a sense of perfectionism (external orientation) as he explains that if the project was not well done it must have been because of a lack of time or a lack of qualifications to do the job. He does not even consider the option that he might have submitted a poorly done project. As he describes his relationship with the "boss" the fact that he becomes quite intimidated by authority figures comes into clear focus. Under these circumstances he retreats into what he calls conservative actions.

2. You have been working on a team project for some time. You come to work and find that you have been transferred to another department.

Response

- a) i wouldn't complain but i'd generally like to know if this is a boot up, down, or sideways.
- b) i would be excited by the change and not too much concerned with not getting credit for work.

Tentative Hypotheses: Bob seems to be assuming a somewhat passive role. He would like to find out what has happened, but doesn't want it to be interpreted as complaining. Further action is not mentioned. In describing his reactions, Bob emphasizes the excitement of change and lack of concern about getting credit for the contributions he has made.

3. You are looking for work and are offered two similar jobs with the same salary. One job requires considerable travelling while the other one does not.

Response

- a) i'd take the job that allows me to practise inertia. i like to be at home.
- b) ?

Tentative Hypotheses: Bob's value for home life is clearly expressed. His use of the word "inertia" is interesting as this description could be applied to his behaviour over the past few months.

4. There has just been a cut-back in employees and you have been given your termination notice.

Response

- a) i'd wonder "why me?" and look forward to a bit of free time.
- b) i'd worry a lot. i get used to those pay cheques.

Tentative Hypothesis: Once again, a lack of assertion seems evident. Although Bob wonders "why me" he only responds by worrying. Another issue which emerges is the potential conflict between his desire for free time and pay cheques. This seems particularly relevant to his current situation.

5. You have been looking for work for six weeks and just haven't been able to come up with anything satisfactory.

Response

- a) i'd go to pieces. i get very depressed when i have to go up against a number of what i progressively feel to be more hostile situations.
- b) very tired.

Tentative Hypotheses: This story seems to give some clue as to why Bob would latch onto the first job that came his way. He seems unable to handle rejection and responds by interpreting every new situation in a progressively more negative light. The probability of a negative self fulfilling prophecy seems very high. This orientation reflects a fairly dominant learning style and suggests that Bob may have to be encouraged to take his mind off the failures and consider how he might alter his approach to facilitate a more positive outcome.

6. You have been working on a job training program for almost three years. The final exams are only six months away, but you feel like forgetting the whole thing and trying another career.

Response

- a) i'd take the exam because i wouldn't possibly want to throw away all that work.
- b) i'd feel like i just got myself into another fine mess but i'd be cautious about acting on those feelings.

Tentative Hypotheses: Bob makes a clear distinction between feelings and actions and adopts a cautious, conservative decision making style. He does not explore other avenues (flexibility), but rather sets aside his feelings and continues with the career path that was chosen earlier.

7. Your spouse has counted on the fact that you will attend college. You have enrolled in a program but aren't really sure that this is what you want.

Response

- a) i'd have a good talk with spouse and see about changing programs.
 b) i'd feel that someone has made a mistake about my future and start fishing.

Tentative Hypotheses: At the action level, Bob indicates a willingness to discuss his plans with his wife. What seems particularly interesting, however, is the fact that he would feel that "someone" must have made a mistake about his future. The identity of the "someone" is not clear, but it does seem to reflect a certain external orientation.

8. You have chosen a career and are now enrolled in the training program. After the first set of examinations you are informed that your marks are not good enough to continue.

Response

- a) i'd seek some sort of opportunity to rewrite and do better. Otherwise i'd see about going to some other school or see if i could re-enter the course.
 b) at first i'd be really shocked and want to live on froot-loops, but i would examine if it was the best i could have done or not and find some way to lift my face.

Tentative Hypotheses: Bob demonstrates some flexible problem solving and critical self examination. Although he would be deeply affected by the setback, he indicates that ultimately he would find the means to regain his self esteem. His response to this question is in marked contrast to some of the other questions and this difference might be worth exploring in greater detail.

Collaborative Analysis

Our discussion of Bob's responses to the story completion measure took place after Bob had begun his search into free lance writing possibilities. The problems Bob was experiencing with this investigation served as an excellent backdrop against which the stories could be reviewed.

Although Bob appeared enthusiastic after our counselling sessions, his reports of actions during the week seemed somewhat minimal. He basically was assuming a fairly reactive pose and showing little initiative. If opportunities arose he would take advantage of them, but otherwise would spend his time in the regular routines.

The stories provided an excellent opportunity to discuss in depth some of the reasons underlying this inaction. The general themes of passivity, external orientation, dominance, intimidation by authority

figures, and lack of self confidence were explored. Initially Bob seemed somewhat defensive and attributed to "just the way I wrote it." As the discussion proceeded, however, he seemed to become more open and acknowledged that there was a great deal of validity to the observations. He recalled some of the events during the week and made connections between these and the stories. For instance, he had earlier attributed his lack of action to friends who had dropped over, visits that his wife had arranged, and television programs (hockey) that couldn't be missed. He now began to see that these were only convenient excuses for avoiding personal responsibility.

On the positive side of the ledger, Bob's response to story #8 was highlighted and we discussed the progress that had been made thus far. He confirmed this and indicated that his wife and others were beginning to notice a difference. He had cleaned up his study, started to do some research, and was trying to put together an article for a local magazine. Even though he still had difficulties, some progress was being made.

As we planned for additional sessions we were able to incorporate some of the insights from the story completion task. The search for employment possibilities was broadened (made more flexible) to include service as well as artistic occupations. Increased emphasis was placed upon the completion of specific tasks with behaviour rehearsal as an adjunct. In addition, Bob seemed to assume a more self confident attitude with less reliance on excuse-making.

DISCUSSION

The integration of the story completion method into a general counselling sequence depends upon the utilization of a humanistic-existential assessment approach. The framework for this approach has been developing in recent years and offers some exciting possibilities for career counselling (Richman, 1967; Brown, 1972; Dana & Leech, 1974; Amundson, 1979). With this approach there is less emphasis on formal diagnosis. The focus is rather on flexibility and collaboration within a structured interviewing format.

When using the story completion method it is important to recognize that it is an approach or technique rather than a specific instrument employing a specific set of test items. A counsellor may choose to develop additional questions that may be more relevant for a particular client.

The emphasis in this paper has been on the use of the story completion method in individual career counselling situations. This approach also can be applied when working with a group or classroom. Once people have responded to the various situations they can be discussed in the group as a whole, or in small discussion groups. The advantage of using a

group method is that people have the opportunity to see how others would respond to the same situation and discuss differences in approach. There also is the possibility of using role playing and behaviour rehearsal to help formulate alternate responses.

References

- Amundson, N. E. (1979). Using projective techniques in career counselling. *Canadian Counsellor*, 13, 225-229.
- Brown, E. (1972). Assessment from a humanistic perspective. *Psychotherapy, Theory, Research and Practice*, 9, 103-106.
- Dana, R. H., & Leech, S. (1974). Existential assessment. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 38, 428-435.
- Egan, G. (1975). *The skilled helper*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- English, H. B., & English, A. C. (1958). *A comprehensive dictionary of psychological and psycho-analytical terms*. New York: David McKay.
- Gordon, V. N. (1981). The undecided student: A developmental perspective. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 59, 433-439.
- Hazler, R. J., & Roberts, G. (1984). Decision making in vocational theory: Evaluation and implications. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 62, 408-411.
- Keller, K. E., Biggs, D. A., & Gysbers, N. C. (1982). Career counselling from a cognitive perspective. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 60, 367-371.
- Komisar, D. D. (1949). A marriage problem solving completion test. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 13, 403-406.
- Mills, E. S. (1954). The Madeline Thomas Completion Stories Test. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 10, 18-22.
- Richman, J. (1967). Reporting diagnostic test results to patients and their families. *Journal of Projective Techniques and Personality Assessment*, 31, 62-70.
- Sargent, H. D. (1953). *The Insight Test*. New York: Grune and Stratton.
- Tiedeman, D. V. (1961). Decision and vocational development: A paradigm and its implication. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 40, 15-21.
- Thomas, M. (1937). Methode des histoires a completer. *Arch. Psychol.*, Geneve, 26, 209-284.

About the Author

Dr. Norm Amundson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia. His major interest area is career counselling and he has focused his work on the dynamics of unemployment, career projective methods and the involvement of the family in career counselling.