

Vocation and Volition: Career Choice Narratives

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Abstract

Psychological models have portrayed career choice narratives in terms of personality dimensions or socio-cognitive reasoning processes. In contrast to these approaches, the research reported on in this study employs a conversation analytic perspective in order to examine the deployment of career choice narratives in terms of intelligibility and accountability. Nursing students on a degree programme were interviewed about their career choice. The responses given are examined for the display of membership categories in terms of personality characteristics commonly associated with nursing as a vocational choice. In addition, the students' accounts are considered as a means of publicly displaying their volition in terms of a reasoned process involving having made a career choice.

Keywords: career, choice, maturity, personality, vocation

Introduction

Psychological models of career choice can be categorized according to two main approaches: (1) a focus on personality-matching with careers, and (2) an understanding of the tasks and decision-making associated with the development of career maturity. In the case of personality-matching it is assumed that an individual's preferences for particular activities is reflective of their occupational career orientations. In accordance with this assumption, psychometric techniques have been used to predict career choices on the basis of personality assessments, and thereby offering some utility for careers guidance counselling. In the case of those who focus on career maturity, the concern is with how individuals engage their reasoning processes to engage in tasks that aid them in arriving at a career choice. This approach has also been a mainstay of careers guidance counselling in terms of helping individuals with the tasks of exploring different career options, crystalizing their own preferences, and then pursuing their career goals. This approach can be summed up succinctly as being concerned with career choice as matters of vocation and volition; an individual's sense of match with an occupational career and the extent to which they have made an active choice. The following section sets out these two main approaches in greater detail before outlining the methodology of the investigation undertaken. Without getting too far ahead of the arguments, an alternative perspective is offered that considers career choice narratives involving nursing students as a product of conversational exchanges within interviews designed to elicit their narratives of how they opted for nursing as a career.

Holland's Personality Matching Approach

Holland's (1959, 1966, 1973, 1985, 1997) theory had dominated the field amongst personality-matching approaches, in which there are six main personality types along with their corresponding environments. The theory has been refined over a number of years, although its basic principles have remained unaltered. In *Making Vocational Choices* (1985: 2-4) he reiterates the four axioms around which his theory is organized:

1. In westernized culture, most people can be categorized as one of six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional.
2. There are six model environments that correspond with the above personality typology.
3. People search for environments that let them express their personality type in terms of attitude and values, as well as adopting agreeable work roles.
4. Behaviour is determined by an interaction between personality and work environment.

Holland derived his career personality typology from the factor analysis of responses to several interest inventories gathered over time. Holland (1985: 19-23) describes the types in terms of interests and aversions as follows:

Realistic types have a preference for activities that entail the explicit ordered, or systematic, manipulation of objects, tools, machines and animals; and an aversion to educational or therapeutic activities (e.g., mechanic, farmer, lorry driver).

Investigative types have a preference for activities that entail observational, symbolic, systematic, and creative investigation of physical, biological, and cultural phenomena in order to understand and control such phenomena; and an aversion to persuasive, social, and repetitive activities (e.g., scientist, designer, engineer).

Artistic types have a preference for ambiguous, free, unsystematised activities that entail the manipulation of physical, verbal, or human materials to create art forms of products; and an aversion to explicit, systematic, and ordered activities (e.g., artist, writer, musician).

Social types have a preference for activities that entail the manipulation of others to inform, train, cure, or enlighten; and an aversion to explicit, ordered, systematic activities involving materials, tools, or machines (e.g., teacher, nurse, counsellor).

Enterprising types have a preference for activities that involve the manipulation of others to attain organizational goals or economic gain; and an aversion to observational, symbolic, and systematic activities (e.g., politician, salesperson, buyer).

Conventional types have a preference for activities that entail the explicit ordered systematic manipulation of data such as keeping records etc.; and an aversion to ambiguous, free, exploratory, or unsystematised activities (e.g., accountant, administrative assistant, statistician).

These descriptions also apply to work environments given the assumption that “the dominant features of an environment reflect the typical characteristics of its members (Holland, 1985: 34). Holland’s theory can be summed up by the old adage that ‘birds of a feather flock together’. However, this apparently simple idea has been refined through correlational research in order to indicate the way in which the types are related to each other in a closed loop in the following order: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Adjacent types are said to be more closely related to one another than those more distant. The theory also includes subtypes in terms of particular combinations of the six personality types that are expressed in terms of a two- or three-type code. For example, an individual is said to be ‘consistent’ if his or her subtype is comprised of elements that are adjacent to each other. Thus, a realistic-investigative person is a consistent subtype in terms of

the elements sharing features such as unsociability, and orientation towards things, and self-deprecation. On the other hand, a conventional-artistic individual would be ‘inconsistent’ given the conflicting elements of this subtype: conformity and originality, control and expressiveness, business and art. If a person has one type which is dominant then he or she is said to be ‘differentiated’.

Holland’s personality-matching approach hinges on the assumption that people possess a set of interests and attitudes that make up distinct personality types. These interests and attitudes predispose individuals in such a way that they chose to work in environments that are congruent with their personality types. The exact nature of the process involved in choosing a career field is left unspecified in the theory. However, a key feature of this approach is its static nature. Individuals are viewed as possessing relatively fixed personality characteristics with career identity being seen in terms of the ‘possession of a clear and stable picture of one’s goals, interests, and talent’ (1985: 5).

Applying Holland’s framework to nursing the ‘occupation finder’ (Holland, 1985) classifies this career area as a ‘social’ occupation. It is therefore said to attract people who primarily perceive themselves as having interpersonal skills and a preference for working with people rather than objects and machines. The particular sub-type for this occupational group is ‘social-investigative’, with the investigative element being of secondary importance and associated with a preference for problem-solving and an interest in science; in this case related to medical matters and healthcare. There have been a number of studies that have applied Holland’s theory of careers to the study of person–vocational career fit in academics. Although a full review of research based on Holland’s model is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief review provides some context for the investigation that is reported on.

Several studies have examined the role of personality in choices of students in higher education and the importance of person–environment fit (Astin, 1993; Feldman, Smart, & Ethington, 1999; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Su et al., 2009). These studies point to achievement in academic and vocational settings being a function of the congruence or fit between personality and the social and physical environments. Person and thing orientations therefore reflect the degree to which people have an interest in the social and physical aspects of their environment (Graziano, Habashi, & Woodcock, 2011; Little, 1968, 1972). Little (1968) considered people’s orientations toward social and physical environments and argued that they differ in how much they are interested in people (‘person orientation’) or objects in their environment (‘thing orientation’). Recent research has indicated that these orientations are not oppositions on a single dimension but rather are independent of one another (Graziano, Habashi, Evangelou, & Ngambeki, 2012). In other words, people can be high in both, low in both, or high in one and low in the other.

Career Maturity

The psychological construct of career maturity has also been a prominent aspect of the career choice literature. It is a multidimensional construct that represents the ability to undertake and manage career-related developmental tasks over the course of an individual’s lifespan (Super, 1953, 1990). Contemporary studies of career maturity stem from the work of Donald Super (Super, 1953) and his stage theory of vocational development. Essentially, these stages involve career construction tasks that individuals must successfully engage with and overcome to progress in their vocational development. For example, during the exploration stage (age 14–24), individuals must engage with the career construction tasks of crystallizing, specifying, and implementing a career choice (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Therefore, an

indicator of career maturity during this period is the formation of a career choice by engaging in a process of exploring various options and pursuing any necessary educational qualifications to achieve a career goal. According to Savickas (2005), the accomplishment of these tasks is an index of the overall degree of vocational development which can be measured by the Student Career Construction Inventory (SCCI, Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), as a measure of vocational development. Individuals with a greater degree of vocational development are able to engage more effectively with career construction tasks and thereby are more likely to achieve favourable career transition outcomes. Savickas et al. (2009) characterized successful engagement with these career construction tasks as leading to individuals who have a sense of control over their career, are able to explore potential career options, and have confidence to in pursuing their aspirations.

The underlying assumption of this approach to career maturity is that an individual's agency and sense of volition is crucial in terms of arriving at a thought-through and rational career choice. Holland (1985) proposed that career personality in terms of differentiation and consistency of vocational interests is also reflective of career maturity. In this view, individuals with differentiated and consistent interest profiles are more likely to engage successfully with career decision tasks. However, empirical support for this hypothesis has yielded weak or negligible correlations between career maturity and differentiation, or between career maturity and consistency (e.g., Guthrie & Herman, 1982; Hirschi & Läge, 2007; Miner, Osborne, & Jaeger, 1997; Sverko, Babarovic, & Cernja, 2015).

Methodology

Garfinkel (1967) suggests that retrospective accounting for decisions is a common feature of daily life. He argues that decision-making may have little to do with electing a course of action on the basis of available information but rather may be the product of people's ability to define the basis for a decision once made. This type of accounting can therefore be viewed as justifying a course of action and involves "assigning outcomes their legitimate history" (114). He therefore poses the counterintuitive notion that "the outcome comes before the decision" (114). The study presented here has adopted this retrospective view of decision-making and in doing so involves two important methodological implications. First, attention was required to be directed at individuals who had already made a career choice rather than those who had yet to decide. Second, those involved in the study had to be given an adequate opportunity to account for their choices in terms being given an opportunity to talk at length about their reasoning.

The study focused on undergraduate nursing students at a Scottish university taking these two propositions into account. Students were recruited by direct in-class invitation across all stages of the degree programme with a total of twenty taking part in total. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format involving general questions about their choice of nursing as a course and career choice. These interview questions were designed to elicit answers that gave the students an opportunity to talk about themselves and their career interests (e.g., "Tell me about what interested you in nursing"), as well as account for their course choice (e.g., "Why did you decide to study for a degree in nursing?"). With regard to these kinds of questions, degree course choice was taken as a proxy for occupational career choice.

The interviews were transcribed on the basis of readability rather than including paralinguistic features. This is justified given that the basis of the analysis was to examine the participants' attempts to produce credible and coherent accounts of their choice of nursing as a career.

With regard to the analytic procedure, the transcript material was read by taking into account a conversation analytic stance in which both questions and answers were considered in relation to each other as turns at talk. Use was made of Sack's (1972, 1974) work on membership categories. Sack noted that persons may be described according to certain membership categories, for example, by occupation. These categories can be drawn from certain conventional collections which Sacks referred to as membership categorization devices. An important feature of these is that they can be used as a means of ascribing to person activities or characteristics that they are conventionally associated with. When a certain category is used by a speaker, the hearer is able to make use of a stock of conventional knowledge about the category and thereby make certain inferences. In interviews concerning career choices these stock of conventional knowledge can be used in order to guide interviewers in how to respond to interviewees, and in turn how interviewees produce the kinds of answers expected so as to produce intelligible responses.

Analysis and Discussion

An examination of the nursing students' interviews revealed that seventeen of the twenty explicitly mentioned working with people and helping them as the basis for their choice of this career. The interview extracts below are illustrative of this kind of response:

NRS7

I think it will be a well worth job, I'll get lots of job satisfaction from it. And everyday is going to be different, it's not going to be boring. And getting to know more people, and helping them, feeling you're doing something at the end of the day, it's not just wasted really.

NRS4

All you're doing is everything that the person needs, from the most basic thing, maybe just listening to them talking.

NRS2

Well, I helped at (name of centre) which is a day centre for the physically and mentally disabled once a week and really enjoyed helping with it. So I really wanted to do something to help, I really wanted to help.

NRS10

The idea of helping people because I thought that would be useful for society. And, I just generally think that this is a good idea of offering help, it's what nursing's about.

NRS8

You have to be caring and understanding. You have to have patience as well and sort of know how to approach a person as well.

These student responses that appears to be in alignment with Holland's typology in terms of being a 'social type' of vocational personality. All draw upon notions of working with people and helping them and are therefore what would be expected in terms of the motivation to pursue a career in nursing. Furthermore, ten students gave responses that stressed 'job satisfaction' and played down financial reward. The extract below was typical of this kind of response when asked directly about salary.

NRS1

Int: Did you ever consider salary?

Resp: I don't think in nursing you can because it's not, well it's not really that good a salary. So I mean, I wouldn't go into a job I didn't like, I couldn't, even although it was a

good salary. I wouldn't think it would be worth it if you weren't that happy. Whereas with nursing you come away thinking you've done something worthwhile, you get some satisfaction.

The student emphasizes that nursing is a vocational choice by contrasting having a “good salary” with not being “worth it if you weren't happy”. Essentially, the student makes the case that salary is much less important than job satisfaction and “thinking you've done something worthwhile”. This kind of response therefore stresses vocational commitment in terms relegating monetary reward in favor of personal psychological reward.

In a similar vein, the students also produced responses that could be taken as indicating a level of career maturity in terms of having undertaken a process of arriving at a career choice. In other words, the students gave answers that were indicative of a deliberative process whereby nursing was considered and researched as a career. The responses presented below were typical of such an indication of career maturity:

NRS2

I considered teaching for a while because I like working with kids. But then I decided once I had been to (name of day centre for children with disabilities) that I preferred nursing.

NRS9

I considered teaching, primary teaching and I thought about drama, I was interested in drama at school and was in a drama club. I thought about going into drama college but I thought I would be practical, there isn't much chance of a job and it's not a very secure thing. I thought it would more practical to do something like nursing, you're always sure of a job at the end of it.

NRS3

Int: Did you consider any other careers?

Resp: They were all medically orientated, it was either stick my job out as a technician or go into physiotherapy or something.

Int: What drew you to the medical side of things?

Resp: Just at school I was better at sciences than the business side of things.

These kinds of response refer to some deliberative thought process in which students are able to account for pursuing nursing in terms of engaging in the career-related decision making that results in the exploration and crystallization of a choice. Therefore, on the face of it, it appears that the students' responses were indicative of their career personality type as well as displaying a level of career maturity resulting in the choice of nursing.

Taking the two types of accounts together, it would appear that the students' responses align with Holland's social personality type for nursing and that they exhibit a degree of career maturity in terms of engaging with career decision-making in terms of ‘thinking through’ career options. In other words, the students appear to display their in their answers a sense of vocation and volition with respect to their choice of nursing. However, what follows is an alternative reading of these kinds of responses based upon attending to the interactional context from a conversation analytic perspective.

One way of understanding the use of personality-expressive accounts is the use of membership categorization devices (Sacks, 1972, 1974). These are linguistic devices used in the accomplishment of intelligibility and deployed by speakers within an interactional context. Holland draws attention to the stereotypical nature of people's perception of careers claiming that “our everyday experience has generated a sometimes inaccurate but apparently

useful knowledge of what people in various occupations are like (1985, p.9). He points out that were this not so, interest inventories which are based on these stereotypes would have little validity. While shared bodies of knowledge about different occupations exist, the respondents packaged this kind of knowledge in different ways to meet the demands of the questions asked within the interview context. In other words, the students' responses must be considered as part of detailed examination of the sequential nature of the conversational turns. In the examples below, the conversational context has been included, in which the apparent personality-expressive account is given. Part of the first extract presented from student NRS3 was presented above. With the addition of the preceding question-and-answer turn the subsequent responses can now be considered within the flow of interaction.

NRS3

Int: Why do you want to enter the field of nursing?

Resp: For as long as I could remember I've said I'm going to be a nurse and that's it. Well, last year I worked as a technician and was drawn more from the technical side of things to the patient kind of thing.

Int: Did you consider any other careers?

Resp: They were all medically orientated, it was either stick my job out as a technician or go into physiotherapy or something.

Int: What drew you to the medical side of things?

Resp: Just at school I was better at sciences than the business side of things.

In the extract above the interviewer's initial question is met with what was a variant of very common rhetorical form of signaling vocational commitment across the corpus of data ("For as long as I could remember I've said I'm going to be a nurse and that's it".) This way of responding (most commonly expressed as "I've always wanted to be a nurse") signals a longstanding vocational interest. However, the respondent then proceeds to talk about working as a technician and being "drawn to the patient side of things". What is evident here is that the latter implies an evolving vocational interest rather than arising out of a long term commitment or expression of a relatively fixed vocational personality type. When asked about other careers considered the respondent mentions "medically orientated" ones, with the specific example of physiotherapy. Again, the implication here is of at least considering other careers rather than acting on longstanding commitment to pursue nursing. This ties in with the display of career maturity in response to the questions set. These questions presuppose a decision-making process ("Did you consider any other careers?") or lead on from what the student has said in the previous turn at talk (What drew you to the medical side of things?). What is apparent here is the interplay of the question-and-answer turns and how this conversational context shapes the trajectory of the types of responses given. It is notable that apparent personality-expressive signs of career maturity can be extracted from this interaction but only if the conversational context is set aside and there is a singular focus on decontextualized responses. A further example of the active nature of the ways in which the interactive context shapes the nature of the students' responses about their career choice is given below.

NRS18

Resp: ...usually you say you want to be something when you grow up and it changes every week but with me it's that I've always wanted to be a nurse....

Int: What other careers did you think about?

Resp: Em, other jobs in hospitals.

Int: Such as?

Resp: Radiography, then I thought I don't have physics so I put that out of it. And then there's occupational therapy and physiotherapy and I thought no, I want more personal contact with the patient rather than in and out really.

In the interview extract for respondent NRS18 the longstanding commitment to nursing is accomplished through the more common “I’ve always wanted to be a nurse” response. This is apparently strengthened with a preceding contrast with the claim that during childhood career interests are highly changeable (“it changes every week”). However, when asked about other careers considered, the student gives a general response in terms of “other jobs in hospitals”. When asked to specify these through the simple form of question “Such as?”, the student duly obliges by portraying pursuing nursing as an active choice involving the rejection of radiography, occupational therapy and physiotherapy in favour of “more personal contact with the patient”. Again, the immediacy of the interactional context in terms of the ways in which questions and responses are mutually intertwined means that simply to decontextualize responses and remove them from the context in which they were given can arguably create artefacts such as ‘vocational personalities’ or evidence of ‘career maturity’.

A further example demonstrates an interesting situation in which a student presents entry into nursing as a vocation but one rooted in a family tradition. What is interesting about this example is that student mentions the “technical side” of the work involved. When asked if this is a particular interest, what follows is a response that pulls back and draws on the more familiar standard account of caring for the patient.

NRS14

Int: Why did you want to enter the field of nursing?

Resp: Well, originally, I mean I’d always wanted to be a nurse, it’s calling from when I was very small. I’ve got nursing in my family and a lot of my family members are nurses. Before I started, it was just, you know, you think of caring but now it’s more of a case think all that nursing involves.

Int: When you say all that nursing involves, what is that?

Resp: You don’t really think about the technical side of it, you think more basic nursing care, things like that.[...] I enjoy the technical side of it as much as anything now, the challenge of being in a sort of high-tech area and specialist areas where you have to know it all.

Int: Is this something you are particularly interested in, high-tech areas?

Resp: Well, I enjoy that side, as I said, but I wouldn’t want to work in a place where you are getting away from caring as well. I mean I wouldn’t want to get away from, you know, being able to sit with the patient.

What is interesting here is how the student’s account of entry into nursing moves from a personal vocation (“I’d always wanted to be a nurse, it’s calling from when I was very small”), through to a hint of family influence (“I’ve got nursing in my family and a lot of my family members are nurses”), on to a concern with “being in a sort of high-tech area”, and then back to patient care as a career motivation (“I wouldn’t want to work in a place where you are getting away from caring as well”). An appreciation of this sort of range of response is only possible through an understanding of the ways in which question-and-answer turns mutually shape one another.

In the example above the student implicitly drew upon a family influence type of account. In the next example this type of account is much more explicitly given as the basis for entry into nursing as a career. The result is a much more protracted question-and-answer sequence in which the student is effectively quizzed on the extent of her entry into nursing as a matter of her own volition and career maturity.

NRS12

Int: Why do you want to enter the field of nursing?

Resp: My mum had been a nurse and I've lots of relatives who are nurses and they sort of, not influenced, but I was always interested in what they had to say about their work.....

Int: You say there's people in your family who are nurses. Did they influence you....?

Resp: When they'd come home they'd talk about their work and things like that.....I think my mum was a bit surprised cause I'd never said anything when I was younger...but with me it's that I've always wanted to be a nurse and I think she was surprised that I was going through with it.

Int: When you say you've always wanted to be a nurse what is it then that attracted you to this area?....I could give you many jobs where you would be working with people, why specifically nursing?

Resp: It's more personal with the person being a nurse.....

Int: But I could give you a job where you're interested in people, let's say a school teacher or lecturer.....I'm interested in why you want to do nursing. I mean you've mentioned your relatives and it would seem that they held sway with you.....

Resp: Well, teaching for a start wouldn't be for me....em, I thought about all them things but I've always sort of swayed towards nursing.

Int: What other careers did you think about?

This sequence of talk is interesting in the way that the question-and-answer turns lead off from the student's family influence type of account. The student begins by drawing attention to family members who are nurses but repairs and qualifies being influenced by them ("...and they sort of, not influenced, but I was always interested in what they had to say about their work."). This is picked upon on by the researcher-interviewer who proceeds to directly ask about the issue of influence ("Did they influence you...?"). In this regard, influence implies something less than the student's own volition in entering nursing or being the right type of personality for this career. The interviewer further probes this issue by asking the student to specify her interest in nursing ("When you say you've always wanted to be a nurse what is it then that attracted you to this area?"). Note also the further qualification of the question through the addition of "I could give you many jobs where you would be working with people, why specifically nursing?". It is at this point that the student begins to tentatively draw upon the standard membership account in terms of interpersonal contact ("It's more personal with the person being a nurse.."). However, the interviewer seeks further specificity by challenging the student with other occupations that involve working with people ("...let's say a school teacher or lecturer.....I'm interested in why you want to do nursing."). Indeed, it is clear at this point that the issue of family influence over the student's career choice is being pursued ("I mean you've mentioned your relatives and it would seem that they held sway with you....."). The student responds directly to the question in terms of the other careers mentioned but not the issue of influence itself. At this point the interviewer picks up on the student's mention of "I thought about all them things" by turning to the issue of career maturity in terms of other career areas considered.

What is apparent in these exchanges is the ways in which both interviewer and respondent attend to each other turns such that the overall account leads to the construction of a dialogue that is productive of a career decision or choice. This co-construction of these matters through the question-and-answer turns in the there-and-then of the interview is crucial in understanding how career choice accounts are created within the interactional context.

Conclusion

The analysis and discussion of the interview extracts presented above demonstrates the explanatory power of focusing on the ways in which career choice, when asked about as a 'choice', (i.e. as an act of volition) is accounted for within conversational turns. As Harper, Randall and Sharrock (2016: 204 - 209) argue reasons are not causal in relation to choices but

rather are embedded within different language games (Wittgenstein, 1953) and bound up with reasoning as cultural knowledge. Interview participants, through their question-and-answer turns, display to one another this cultural reasoning in relation to framing their courses of action as expressive of their interests and reflective of their dispositions (i.e., expression of vocation), and as a product also of engaging in tasks reflective of career maturity that involve a reasoned process of decision-making (i.e., expression of volition).

Instead of treating responses as revealing something about respondents' vocational personalities or their level of career maturity, this study offers an altogether different proposition, one that considers these matters as being produced through the question-and-answer turns within interviews designed to elicit career choice narratives. This perspective allows the researcher to examine how responses are contextually tied to the questions asked and their presuppositions. In other words, the researcher focuses on issues of intelligibility and accountability. This also allows for the study whole conversational patterns rather than selected aspects that seem to align with a personality matching or career maturity model when abstracted out. Interviewing nursing students about why they chose nursing presupposes an active process of decision-making and selection. Students therefore attend to this as an accountable matter in the interviews in terms of the expression of volition. In westernized culture finding out about one's options and 'thinking them through' as part of arriving at decision is considered desirable in terms of the operation of reason. This is also tempered by the notion that people are in possession of interests that are reflective of their preferences and that this can be read off as an index of their 'personality'. In the case of nursing, a strong interest in helping and caring for others is considered as a vital aspect of the job and that, given this common understanding, must be publicly avowed and expressed. Both interviewer and interviewees attend to these matters in the course of their interview exchanges and thereby engage in co-constructing such narratives.

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Brief biography of the author

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