

Article 1

Early Recollections and Career Counseling: Identity, Adaptability, and Meaningful Work

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Abstract

The use of early memories continues to be a technique used across many counseling specialties. Career counseling is experiencing a re-emergence in the use of early recollections based on their application to narrative approaches. The purpose of this article is to review the uses of early recollections in career counseling and highlight their use in narrative approaches. The article includes a description of collecting and using early recollections to help clients identify strengths and adaptability, develop identity and meaning, and promote understanding of the individual's unique approach to work.

Keywords: early recollections, career counseling, career construction, Individual Psychology

Early memories (EMs) have been used in counseling for several decades (Bruhn, 1984; Clark, 2002; Meier, Boivin, & Meier, 2008; Singer & Bonalume, 2010). Adcock and Ross (1983) discussed early recollections as one way that individuals construct and expose aspects of personality. Singer and Salovey (1991) saw early recollections as a basis for understanding schema systems in the person. Adler (1939) posited that early recollections (ERs) were projections of the present-day self onto the past. This led to the use of ERs as a projective technique for identifying lifestyle (personality) themes and unconscious goals that explain behavior.

Specifically, the term *early recollections* represents an Adlerian process of collecting early memories in specified ways (Eckstein & Kern, 2002). Generally, clients are instructed to remember actual events from early life (before the age of 10 is normally acceptable). The occasions must be remembered events and not situations told to the client about happenings. Typically, three to five ERs are collected and then the client and counselor engage in a co-interpretative process. The counselor often poses lifestyle hunches in the form of a tentative response (could it be . . . ? or does this sound applicable?), sharing lifestyle themes (attributes) that may be inferred from the events.

These lifestyle explanations, derived from ERs, are theorized to represent dimensions of purposeful behavior, emotion, and personality that can be identified and used in counseling sessions to assist clients in self-understanding and behavior change. This self-knowledge application of ERs is in concert with Parson's (1909) model of career development. Drawing from the memories of participants, ERs can be used to illustrate how clients view and interpret personally held beliefs about the outside world and their chosen style of life (Attarian, 1978). In his work exploring and examining ERs, Adler saw the importance of ERs and how these memories connected a client's lifestyle with their life tasks (Elliott, Amerikaner, & Swank, 1987; Watts & Engels, 1995). Accordingly, Watts and Engels (1995) postulated that mental health counseling and career counseling could be unified through the use of individual psychology. Thus, researchers have explored the use of ERs as career assessment strategies in career counseling.

Early Recollections

Many career researchers suggest the use of ERs in career counseling (Maree, 2010; McKelvie, 1979; Savickas, 1998; Watkins, 1984). Early work with ERs and career counseling focused on identifying traits in the memories and attempted matching those traits with specific work functions and interests.

Manaster and Perryman (1974) stressed the value of using ERs with clients seeking occupational guidance. Examination of a client's ERs using the Manaster-Perryman Manifest Content Early Recollection Scoring Manual (Manaster & Perryman, 1979) focused on scoring a client's ERs using seven categories with the purpose of matching a client to a career. The seven categories Manaster and Perryman examined were: characters mentioned in the ERs, themes, concern with detail, setting where the ERs took place, active-passive activity, internal-external control, and affect. During the study, the ERs of teachers, counselors, nurses and other medical professionals, biological scientists, and accounting/business majors were collected and examined. Manaster and Perryman found that the word "mother" showed most frequently in the nursing group, followed secondly by counselors—two helping professions. This significant finding led to the postulation that the "mother-helper-supporter" image is common among nurses and counselors and that the occupations of nursing and counseling would be a natural fit for individuals who displayed this theme in their ERs.

Hafner and Fakouri (1984) conducted a study examining the ERs of group participants. ERs were collected from 90 college seniors and examined by external judges. Using the Manaster-Perryman Manifest Content Early Recollection Scoring Manual (Manaster & Perryman, 1979), Hafner and Fakouri found themes that indicated

specific careers. The word “school” appeared more frequently in ERs for individuals considering teaching as a career. Those individuals considering accounting discussed themes of internal control and mentioning animals and people in their ERs was less frequent.

By examining ERs from multiple participants, Attarian (1978) hypothesized that ERs contained substantial information in regards to educational and vocational preferences of participants. He posited that clinicians trained in individual psychology could correctly place individuals into their perspective careers from the content of their ERs. Attarian conducted a study of 31 individuals, purposely selected to represent participants from various Holland codes. Three judges interpreted the ERs and placed the participants into prospective majors. These results were compared to the results of each participant completing the self-directed search. Two of the three judges performed well in placing participants into majors congruent with their Holland coding results. Attarian reported significant results for his hypotheses.

Amerikaner, Elliot, and Swank (1988) used the Early Recollections Questionnaire, the Early Recollections Rating Scale, and Holland’s Vocational Preference Inventory to measure the correlation between participants’ social and vocational identity. The results indicated a positive correlation between social interest and job satisfaction, further strengthening the argument to use ERs as an indicator for vocational choice. Other studies (Coram & Shields, 1987; Fakouri, Fakouri, & Hafner, 1986; Hafner & Fakouri, 1984; Hafner, Fakouri, & Etzler, 1986; Holmes & Watson, 1965; McFarland, 1988) were conducted that demonstrated associations between the content and description of ERs and participants’ vocational choice.

The use of ERs in recent work has evolved as career counseling theories and methods highlighted changes in the structure and fluidity of employment (e.g., the protean career [Hall, 1996] and boundaryless careers [Arthur & Rousseau, 1996]). These new career development theories emphasize personal adaptation to frequent work transitions as an important aspect for career development study (Hall, 2002; Savickas, 2011). Additionally, these theories focus on the importance of a work identity (Hall, 2002) that is present and expressed across work transitions, representing consistency and meaning in workers’ lives. Where prior work focused on interpretation of ERs and matching clients to specific careers, similar to interest assessment methods in career counseling, newer uses of ERs focus on identifying client’s career adaptability, work identity, and meaningful work experiences (Maree, 2011; Savickas, 2011).

Savickas (1998) developed the Careerstyle Interview (now called the Career Construction Interview; Savickas, 2011), based on the use of early memories and ERs. Savickas used a sequence of seven questions to interview career clients and collect narrative memories concerning: heroes and heroines remembered from childhood, favorite movies and books, current activities, a favorite saying or motto, favorite and disliked school subjects, and three ERs. From this data, Savickas instructs counselors through a process of constructing a career story with the client. The constructive process is based on the adaptive and identity traits found in the responses to the interview questions. Additionally, the use of ERs often identifies a specific trauma or hurt that brings deeper meaning to the client’s career pursuits. This process and subsequent theory (career construction theory; Savickas, 2011) has received much attention and emerging empirical support (Barclay & Stoltz, 2016; Reh fuss, Del Corso, Galvin, & Wykes, 2011).

Maree (2010) cited Savickas as the first person to blend psychodynamic approaches and the use of ERs with differential and developmental career approaches to create an encompassing and easy to follow method of career counseling. Maree referred to the use of ERs in career counseling as the three anecdotes technique (TAT). In a case study, Maree reported use of the TAT with a female client contemplating a career transition. Through discussing the content of the ERs, the participant was able to make meaning of her experiences and use the insights generated from the memories to move forward in her career (Maree, 2010).

ERs are selected by clients' as lifestyle goals used to cope with and overcome current situations and perceived barriers (Maree, 2010). When exploring ERs with clients, counselors using career construction theory are not interpreting memories in hopes of matching clients to vocational titles; they are focused on assisting clients in using biographical reasoning in order for clients to enlist adaptive traits, clarify personal work identity, and create meaning from their ERs to take authorship of their lives (Maree, 2010; Savickas, 2011). Savickas wrote that ERs are a way to delve straight into clients' central life problems and represent how clients view themselves and the constructed truths of their worldviews. ERs are a way for counselors and clients to narrate intricate life problems, emotions, and transitions that affect work life and decision making.

Lengelle and Meijers (2012) and Reid and West (2011) claim that career practitioners are reluctant to use narrative approaches, including ERs. This hesitancy is based on the belief that career counseling may move into mental health work with the client. These authors suggested that a lack of guided interventions is a significant barrier to using narrative practices in career counseling. The purpose of this article is to assist school and career counselors in learning about the use and application of ERs in career counseling. As highlighted previously, memories are used to aid clients in learning more about personal perceptions, values, worldviews, and lifestyle traits that interplay in work lives. Following, we review specific ways of collecting early memories and processes for helping clients apply the content of memories to stated needs for career counseling and personal growth.

Collecting Early Recollections for Career Construction

In collecting ERs in career counseling, counselors recognize the techniques and strategies for building a therapeutic relationship common in many forms of counseling. Career counseling is no exception to the need for the counselor to attend to building a therapeutic alliance (Bedi, 2004; Masdonati, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2009; Masdonati, Perdrix, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2014; Whiston & Rahardja, 2008). Once the alliance is present, the counselor introduces the concept that ERs can hold narrative data that could be helpful in exploring the stated career-related difficulty and asks the client if he or she is willing to participate. After agreeing, the process can begin by asking the client to relax and think of early life experiences. Giving the client time to reflect, the counselor prompts the client for the first memory. In this process, the counselor strives to write all of the memory verbatim to catch the intricate language presented by the client. Once the memory is complete, the counselor will ask a few follow-up questions: What is the most salient moment of the memory (a climax moment)? What emotional word captures this salient moment for the client (emotional experience)? What is a headline representing the

memory (the essence of the memory)? The responses from these questions are written verbatim and the process is repeated to collect additional ERs. Three to five is a common number used to create a lifestyle profile.

Constructing and Narrating the Story

After collecting the memories, the counselor needs time to reflect on the data, so the collection process is usually best left to the end of the first session. This gives the counselor time between sessions to reflect and work with the ERs content. Rereading and underlining key phrases, adjectives, and verbs is a good starting place for recognizing lifestyle themes. Key phrases are useful for relating the story elements back to the client in her or his personal vernacular. Adjectives can indicate specific descriptors of lifestyle attributes and worldviews. Finally, verbs are used to represent intention, movement, and levels of determination and commitment.

Additionally, researchers (Manaster & Perryman, 1979; Meier et al., 2008; Singer & Bonalume, 2010; Stoltz & Barclay, 2015) have developed schemes to codify early memories. Specifically, Stoltz and Barclay (2015) indicated the use of theming ERs and other content for career counseling. These authors described a process of helping clients uncover work identities, adaptabilities, and meaning-making processes. Specifically, they focus on exploring the ERs content and looking for overall themes that indicate movement (adaptability and meaning-making), life perspectives (identity and meaning-making), and strengths (adaptability). Below are some author created interpretive examples using ERs.

Movement: Motivation in ERs

A focus on movement comes from individual psychology (Ansbacher, 1979) and portrays the client's strategies for interacting with social life and the tasks generated by a culture. Content from the ERs foretells the client's ways of moving through life. For example, a client shares an aspect of an ER:

I remember feeling as though the ice and mud in the pond had a hold on me as I crashed through the ice. It was dragging me into its icy wrath, but eventually, I was able to break free and trudge from the desolate pond.

In this example, the client was sharing a memory of walking on a pond alone in the country as a small boy, when he suddenly cracked through the ice. This example demonstrates the surprise and lethality of life events, but also accentuates the client's tenacity and persistence in coping with seemingly difficult and arduous challenges. The example shows that this client may see the present career struggle as having an "icy" grip, but he also knows that persistence in the struggle will be freeing. The themes (see Stoltz & Barclay, 2015) for tension, context, emotions, perception of the event, sensory detail, and strategies all represent the movement of the client. Helping him see his trait of persistence, and willingness to survive, even though he "trudges" to success, can help in creating a new narrative for the present career dilemma. This example demonstrates the use of movement themes exemplifying the client's feeling of being dragged, breaking free, and trudging as ways of recognizing, conceptualizing, and coping with life challenges.

ERs: Windows to the World

Life perspectives are important aspects of helping clients recognize how they perceive and process the world. Stoltz and Barclay (2015) included theming categories of causal links, emotions, meaning-making, mode of interaction, perceptions of events, specificity, and the client's perceived struggle in their conceptualization of reviewing ERs for career counseling. Using ERs, counselors look for aspects related to these categories that come together and represent dimensions of the client's worldview. A young female client shares the memory,

My mother asked me to peel potatoes and I kept dropping them because they were slippery with the water. Each time I dropped one she would retrieve it from the floor and tell me to keep trying. I remember her being so supportive and helping me to get the potatoes peeled.

In this ER, the client remembers being supported as she faced a challenge and developed a skill. She relied on her mother to be patient and support her while she developed the skill of peeling the wet potatoes. Her difficulty and reason for coming to career counseling was that she was not finding support in her current environment to make career decisions. She was feeling depressed and lost and sought career counseling for help in understanding why she felt empty inside with her work. In this memory, the mode of interaction was the young girl waiting for her mother to retrieve the potatoes and support her while she developed the skill of peeling the wet potatoes. Her perspective was that she needed her mother to be patient and supportive. She revealed that her present work environment did not wait for her to develop skills and did not provide developmental support. She had been passively waiting for support and, through counseling, began to realize that she could seek support in more active ways, similar to her seeking help from career counseling. This example reveals that ERs can help expose a client's worldview of how help and assistance "should" (Ellis, 1975) be delivered.

Strengths in ERs: An Adaptability Focus

Strengths are often overlooked in ERs due to a focus on painful memories and themes. However, strengths, even derived from negative memories, can be a source of motivation and encouragement for clients to set and obtain counseling goals. Stoltz and Barclay (2015) indicated that emotions, meaning-making, mode of interaction, perception of events, relationships, sensory detail, and strategies are all appropriate categories for developing themes of strengths. In ERs, clients expose strengths and may not recognize or accept them as such. Cognitive counseling approaches rely on cognitive reframing as a technique, and this process is also part of finding strengths in ERs (Watts & Critelli, 1997). A first-year college student sought career counseling because he was struggling with pursuing engineering but had not enjoyed his higher level math classes in high school. His performance was fine, but he was not stimulated by the work. His ER exposed a strength he had not realized:

I was jumping in a mud puddle just having the time of my life, when my father began yelling at me to stop. He feared I was ruining my new shoes before I had gotten to wear them to school. I simply walked over to the hose and rinsed the shoes and exclaimed, they are good as new. My father laughed and said I guess so!

In this memory, the young boy showed his ability to repair a situation that was not the crisis his father had thought. As the client reflected on the memory with the counselor, the young man began to recognize his strength. He acknowledged he had an ability to determine unique solutions to seemingly crisis situations. This led to a discussion of engineering as a way of solving problems in real world applications. The client identified his strength of being able to reason new solutions to problems and admitted he never saw engineering from this perspective. This demonstrates a recognition of strengths, career information acquisition, identity formation, and meaningfulness of work. All these come together to help the client understand more about himself or herself and the options for different careers.

ERs and Vocational Personalities

In addition to the theming categories mentioned above, the use of Holland's codes are helpful in assisting clients to understand the content of early memories. Holland (1992) referenced Adler (1939), among others, as inspiration for his types of work personalities. The key word here is personalities. Holland viewed interests as an expression of personality and built his coding structure from this concept. Within his coding scheme are descriptions of traits, values, preferences, and attitudes. These descriptors are fundamental to building interpretations of ERs for application to career counseling. For example, a female client shared an ER:

I was in the car with my family and we were going to a holiday dinner at my grandmother's. We were singing and having fun until we had a flat tire. My father and I got out of the car and I helped him change the tire. I remember he showed me how to use the jack and loosen the lug nuts on the wheel. I remember thinking that he followed a very specific process of changing the tire and I liked learning how to do it. To this day I feel confident in changing a tire on my car.

In this memory, the young woman displayed aspects of both realistic and conventional themes in her ER. These indicate traits of orderliness, a focus on things, and concrete applications. Also noted in her ER is the inclusion of family, which may indicate social aspects of her personality. Noting these aspects of her work personality may assist in expanding her repertoire of skills and interests and provide her with ideas concerning her career directions.

Meaningfulness in Work Lives

A final aspect of working with ER material in career counseling is helping clients create meaningful work lives. Making meaning in life is predictive of self-regulatory processes (Cox & McAdams, 2014) that help people cope and adapt to changes in work life. Additionally, meaningfulness is generated from life stories and enhanced by setting goals, developing life projects, and acting in concert with the inner-self and value systems (McAdams, 2013). One client shared a memory of receiving solace from escaping to nature:

I remember a terrible fight between my mother and father. They were screaming and yelling, and I could not stand it any longer. I ran out of the house and into the strip of woods along our driveway. There I sat, and cried for a while, but became distracted by the light glistening in the trees. I remember the light bouncing and

reflecting and it gave me a sense of connection to the natural world. I knew then that, when I grew up, I needed to be connected to that world. Later, when I discovered botany, I knew I had found a career that would captivate me for life. I enjoy working in the greenhouse caring for the plants. I see myself nurturing others through building gardens and sanctuaries.

In this ER, the client recognizes the negative aspects of her parents fighting but draws on the experience in the woods as the catalyst for providing herself and others with a sense of calm and serenity, creating a purpose for her career pursuits.

Helping clients connect stories, through ERs, to present-day challenges is an important emphasis in narrating career lives. Through the process of exploring aspects and themes of the ERs, clients learn about what carries meaning and virtue in their lives. By learning the fundamental and consistent aspects of their personal existence, clients build continuity and meaning across the life span. This meaningfulness builds satisfaction and wholeness in work lives.

When using ERs, clients share many aspects of their lives. Memories often hold unpleasant, traumatic, and disturbing images. Being prepared to use this material to describe resilience, strength, learning, and adaptation are important skills in career counseling. Using this personal information as applicable to work endeavors is the focus of this process. When using ERs, counselors may fear being pulled into mental health issues that may not be appropriate for the counseling context. However, structuring the client, seeking supervision, making appropriate mental health referrals, and being willing to contain the ER data to work-related endeavors will help provide a framework for using ERs in career counseling. Clients usually circle back to the difficulties that brought them into counseling, and venturing through some of these personal reflections can be productive and helpful when clients are creating new chapters to their career story.

In summary, the use of early recollections is gaining recognition in career counseling. Previous researchers focused on using the content from early recollections for matching an individual's traits with specific careers, similar to trait and factor approaches to career development. More recent methods are focused on integrating ERs with narrative approaches to help career clients with a myriad of career issues including career transitions, developing adaptability, identity formation and strengthening, and identifying the meaningfulness in work lives. These approaches depend on helping clients draw on personal experiences from childhood in an effort to understand continuity of attributes, life scripts, worldviews, preferences, and meaning over the life course.

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