

# Reauthoring my career narrative towards hope and agency: Twenty years in adult guidance counselling practice

**Joan McSweeney**

Cork Education and Training Board, Ireland

## For correspondence:

Joan McSweeney: [Joan.mcsweeney@corketb.ie](mailto:Joan.mcsweeney@corketb.ie)

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## Abstract

This is a narrative inquiry self-study of the cumulative impact of recent rapid adaptations experienced in my role, and of finding myself at a career crossroads after twenty years in adult guidance counselling practice. Four key, dynamic, and recursive themes were identified: changing context and its impact; social justice - a core value; re-commitment to self-care; connectedness and collaboration in practice. Engaging with these themes has enabled a process of reauthoring a more agentic and hopeful practice narrative.

**Key words:** Adult guidance; professional identity; narrative inquiry; reauthoring; Ireland

## Introduction

I am an adult guidance counsellor with over twenty years' experience in practice, initially in adult education settings. My role is now situated in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland, a sector that is undergoing rapid change since its emergence in 2013, with the formation of a further education and training authority, SOLAS. The former

state providers of vocational education, Vocational Educational Committees (VECs), and FÁS training centres have been amalgamated into sixteen new entities, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) collectively represented by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (Mulvey, 2019; Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024).

Glanton (2024) outlines the increasing neoliberal focus in recent FET strategies and policy, including the shift to performativity and an outcomes-based funding model, where outcomes are focused primarily on upskilling learners for the economy with little mention of a learner-centred ethos focused on citizenship, social justice and personal development which has previously typified adult education. The consequent increased administrative workloads and challenge to also meet learner needs can have significant impact on staff's identities, sense of self and relationship with others. Research with FET adult guidance counsellors in 2018 found that practice and professional identity were being 'profoundly impacted by national and localised lifelong learning and neoliberal policy outcomes' (Hearne et al., 2022, p.136), citing role fragmentation, diffusion, and increased workload, all of which resonated for me. I experienced further significant change post-amalgamation, in moving from working as part of a team of guidance professionals in a city service to a more dispersed model of being a sole guidance counsellor in a county area.

Subsequent recent macro-level events such as the Russia-Ukraine war and a growing number of migrants seeking sanctuary has necessitated further rapid adaption to working with new target groups and increased caseloads. Migrant/multi-cultural guidance counselling with some of the most vulnerable members of society is characterised by high levels of uncertainty and complexity (Chant & Sundelin, 2022; Akkök & Hughes, 2023) necessitating investment to enable career practitioners to be 'trained, empowered, and well-equipped to design and deliver multi-cultural career guidance' (Akkök & Hughes, 2023, p.8). The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), an agency of the Irish Department of Education tasked with supporting and influencing guidance provision across the lifespan in accordance with best practice (NCGE, 2023), outlined challenges with access to information on entitlements and funding; recognition of foreign qualifications; acquisition of English language and support with dealing with trauma (NCGE, 2022).

The Indecon (2019) review of career guidance commissioned by the Department of Education recommended moving away from locating responsibility for guidance solely with the Department of Education to include other relevant Departments, for example, the Department of Social Protection. Implementation of the Indecon review led to further restructuring including the closure of the NCGE in August 2022 (Department of Education, 2022), with its FET guidance functions now re-organised into ETBI. In this transitional period there were less opportunities to meet fellow practitioners and get support and upskilling through related CPD and resource development.

I became aware that working in this period of rapid change was taking a cumulative toll on me as a practitioner, to the extent that I was actively considering if I could continue to stay in the role. I found myself questioning if I should leave a role which had been highly congruent for me and one which I assumed that I would always do. This brought to the fore for me the need to inquire into these difficult experiences, to support myself in getting further insights into my experience and identify how I might sustain myself in my practice. This led to me returning to my alma mater some twenty years after my initial guidance counselling postgraduate qualification, to undertake a Master's thesis, seeking 'exposure to

theory, policy and opportunities for reflection' to support me in becoming a 'more confident, empowered practitioner with a strengthened sense of professional self' (Neary, 2014, p.199).

## Methodology

I chose a narrative inquiry self-study methodology which is defined as an inquiry into problematic situations in practice that are 'confusing, uncertain, or conflicted' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p.582). 'Narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of understanding experience' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.20). It is a multi-dimensional exploration of experience involving temporality (past, present and future), interaction (personal and social), and location (place). We create and tell stories about how we experience and understand our worlds and narrative inquiry seeks to mine these stories for experiential knowledge. Chase (2011, p.422) describes narration as 'the practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities'.

Narrative inquiry recognises that these stories are not constructed in isolation. 'Within this space, each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives' (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.542). I do not exist outside of relationships and my stories are shaped and informed by interacting with stories of others including clients, colleagues, fellow practitioners, management and policies. I am 'in the midst' (Blix et al., 2025) and this relational dimension is a key part of my inquiry, seeking to get further insights and a better understanding of how my narrative is influenced by these broader narratives and what aspects I need to attend to so that I can sustain myself in my practice. Narrative inquiry also brought my awareness to the possibility of constructing alternative, more hopeful narratives.

With its focus on inquiring into experience in practice with participants in the field, Clandinin and Caine (2008) speak about the process of narrative inquiry as beginning with field texts 'commonly called data' (p.544) and the writing of both interim and final research texts. They outline various methods which can be used to gather data including 'conversations...and participant observations...as well as from artifacts. Artifacts...include...policies' (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.544). The data used for this self-study inquiry was generated from conversations, participant observations, and policies.

I engaged in conversations in a wide range of contexts including at work, CPD events and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors conference to assist me in my inquiry. While I haven't recorded these conversations, I have sought to engage actively with new insights gained from these conversations through the taking of field notes and subsequently through reflective journalling as soon as possible after the conversations took place. Some one-to-one conversations happened naturally, including those with clients or with colleagues. I also sought out other conversations to inform my study, for example, with a former colleague who had made the decision to leave the role and other colleagues who were still actively committed, to get a range of perspectives 'co-compositions...telling and showing those aspects of experience that the relationship allows' (Clandinin and Caine, 2008, p.544). Conversations in groups where there were rich discussions with other practitioners also provided thinking points for my journalling, including masterclasses for adult guidance counsellors, and group supervision sessions which were an integral part of the Masters programme.

Data was also collected through my observations as a participant at relevant conferences, seminars, and events to engage with 'how larger social, institutional, and cultural narratives inform our understanding and shape the researchers'...stories by which they live.' (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.545). Field notes were taken throughout these seminars in order to capture key points of interest as well as the mood of the wider practitioner population. These seminars also provided insights from leaders in the field of guidance counselling on current issues and possible future directions. Conferences and events included adult guidance focused regional meetings, national conferences, the Lifelong Guidance Strategy networking event and a series of professional Masterclasses. I also became more active on LinkedIn to connect virtually with the broader guidance counselling community.

Reviewing and engaging with guidance-related policy documents also provided insights into the wider institutional and government narratives around adult guidance counselling and the opportunity to reflect on their impact on my practice. These documents include the Indecon (2019) review of guidance counselling in Ireland, FET strategy documents for the period 2014-2024 (SOLAS 2014, 2020), and the Adult Guidance Association's vision statement for FET adult guidance services (Adult Guidance Association, 2020).

Group supervision with supervisors and fellow students as well as individual supervision with my thesis supervisor supported my teasing out of ethical dilemmas. 'Engaging in the self-study (of teacher education), by its very nature, is an ethical approach to improving practice and the scholarship of practice' (Kitchen, 2019, p.113). Thomas (2019) highlights the risk for researchers in narrative self-inquiry of making themselves vulnerable to improve practice, raising the ethical dilemma of how to protect the self as both the researcher and researched. I acknowledge feeling some vulnerability in sharing these personal experiences, and yet still feel compelled to offer this inquiry in the hope that it may also contribute to the scholarship of guidance counselling practice.

Selecting my research methods of recollections of conversations and observations at a conference and other events, I acknowledge that I cannot get informed consent. I am writing about these experiences as I recall and interrogate them, I recognise that they are not facts, they are my subjective narratives focusing on my individual learning and knowledge creation, constructed from my interactions with others. This inquiry is the unfolding of one practitioner's narrative into problematic experiences being deconstructed and reconstructed by reflecting on the influences of local and national narratives and indeed some international perspectives through engaging with current research. It is difficult therefore to argue for generalisability based on one person's story, instead I offer it as having the potential to make visible the lived experience of working in increasingly dynamic and complex systems which may also speak to other practitioners' experiences. Pino Gavidia and Adu (2022) argue that narrative inquiry approaches with its focus on lived experiences within systems through storytelling has the potential to make a contribution to policy to identify what may be hidden dynamics.

In positioning myself as 'client' at a career crossroads and in congruence with the narrative inquiry methodology, I chose narrative career theories as a framework of analysis to identify themes emerging from my research. Within this framework, I drew on several inter-related career theories in the form of System Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006); storytelling narrative career counselling approach (McMahon et al., 2012); and Narrative Therapy Informed Approach (NTIA) (Mate et al., 2024). These theories emphasise

the possibility of re-authoring practices through which individuals can deconstruct problematic past stories and reconstruct alternative more aspirational stories which allow for the exercising of agency.

## Findings

Using these theories as my framework of thematic analysis of the data in my reflective journals, four key themes emerged. While they are presented separately here, in reality, they are dynamic and recursive (McMahon & Patton, 2016).

### Theme 1: Changing context and its impact

In the early days of my research, seeking to understand these challenging experiences in my practice, I read about identity threat which Petriglieri (2011, p.644) defines as 'experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings or enactment of an identity'. She acknowledges that individuals can appraise an experience differently and that frequent exposure increases the likelihood of identification with identity threat. Threat to identity meanings can arise from experiences of either lack of change or having to make undesired changes and threat to identity enactment with experiences that can prevent or limit expression of the identity (George et al., 2023). Reflecting on this research gives insight and meaning to my experiences in practice of having to adapt my guidance interventions for increasing numbers of migrant learners, with sub cohorts having different entitlements to education. For example, by shifting interventions towards the signposting of information to cope with the large numbers. Engaging with the concept of identity threat helps to make sense of my experiences of struggling with having to make this change to my practice and the way that this led to feelings of inauthenticity. I recognised that despite the constraints on my practice, many migrant learners would have benefitted from more time for personalised guidance as they navigated language barriers, traumatising experiences and a new education and employment landscape.

Listening to a radio interview with a doctor (O'Connor, 2024) where she described becoming aware that she was feeling less empathy, more cynicism and having thoughts of 'no matter what I do'. This echoed my own feelings and thoughts about my practice. She came to understand that she was experiencing moral distress which led me to seek out what was being written about this in the guidance counselling field. In their research with Finnish social workers, Mänttari-van der Kuip et al. (2024) describe moral distress as a complex and dynamic phenomenon which is related to, but distinct from, burnout. Olcoñ & Gulbas (2021) clarify the while burnout is caused by large caseloads, moral distress is related to the nature of the caseloads that practitioners face and is particularly related to work with marginalised groups including migrants. Olcoñ & Gulbas (2021, p.978) concluded that working with marginalised groups both 'produces and perpetuates providers' moral distress' because the interaction of systemic failures and compromised service quality leads to feelings of helplessness, dissatisfaction and disempowerment. 'This emotional toll in turn creates a cycle where providers' capacity to envision authentic, systemic change becomes limited' (Olcoñ & Gulbas, 2021, p.978).

Engaging with these ideas provided a key learning moment as a hidden narrative became visible to me, revealing new knowledge of self. I recognised that a frightening sense of

hopelessness had begun to manifest in me when guidance counselling is about 'offering hope, dignity and strives for equity and equality for all' (Akkök & Hughes, 2023, p.3). Researching moral distress also shifted my focus towards structural barriers including lack of investment which limit my capacity to deliver a quality service.

## Theme 2: Reconnecting with social justice

Researching moral distress through this inquiry reconnected me with social justice as a core value in my work. It helped me to reflect on the cost of adapting my practice in ways which run counter to my core belief in adult guidance counselling as working in solidarity with clients.

The lens of Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) brings attention to the way in which organisational and national systems influence the therapeutic relationship. I recognise that I have been working in an emergency situation brought about by the displacement of large numbers of traumatised people because of war. I acknowledge that the response of the FET sector I work in was extraordinary on many levels. There was rapid expansion in the recruitment of additional tutors to meet the huge demand for English classes and additional staff were recruited to oversee the planning of and responding to the need for classes in their areas. However, in my experience there was not an equivalent expansion of guidance counselling capacity which left us as individual guidance counsellors to self-manage our own responses within existing resources. In the words of Fejes et al. (2021, p.350) guidance counsellors had to 'depend on their ingenuity and creativity when it comes to catering for needs that were not envisaged when institutional structures and practices were put into place'.

The NTIA lens provided a tool for me to reflect back on the origins of social justice in my life and reconnected me with the early days of my practice where I felt my work was more congruent with my values. Sultana (2011, 2018) has been a key influence on me from those early days and through this inquiry I reconnected with his work, gaining new knowledge about how to work with migrants in socially just ways. Sultana (2022) speaks to 'the how to' of working with migrants, addressing barriers including language, recognition of qualifications, culture shock and the lack of social capital and networks to help with sourcing employment. Also, attending to migrants' career identity linked to negative self-concept which can in turn impact on their efforts to establish their career identity in the new country. Supporting them to develop a sense of 'possible selves' (p.499) and the potential to flourish while having to adapt preferences. This re-engagement with social justice as a core value in my practice has been significant in the reauthoring of my narrative towards hope and agency.

## Theme 3: Recommitting to self-care

Through this inquiry I have come to an awareness of the need to re-connect with self-care in 'protecting and preserving yourself in the face of challenging work' (BACP, 2018). The BACP (2018) definition of self-care also speaks to 'making a conscious effort to do things that maintain, improve and repair your mental, physical and spiritual wellness'. Experiencing mindfulness practice as part of group supervision on the Masters led me to seek out ways to bring mindfulness into my daily life as an intentional act of self-care. This created an agentic shift in prioritising self-care and intentionally seeking out related CPD.

Learning about compassion fatigue symptoms brought further insight, identifying with feelings of being overwhelmed, some reduction in empathy and seeking out more time



on my own (Oberg et al., 2023). Vu and Bodenmann (2017) identify organisational, professional and individual risk factors for compassion fatigue, I could identify with many of them including; insufficient staff resources and training, high workload/high intensity, and professional isolation (organisational); repeated exposure to trauma, and poor cohesion/teamwork (professional); high expectations for quality of care, and some issues with coping with the job's requirements (individual). I realised I had internalised my experiences in part, as my not being able to cope, of not being adaptable enough. Through the acquisition of this new knowledge, which this inquiry has brought to my attention, I have begun to reframe my experiences, reauthor the story I was telling myself about my experiences, from a self-blaming one to recognising external structural and systemic factors.

Radey and Figley (2007) describe compassion satisfaction as an individual's sense of self-efficacy related to their helping profession and their sense of positivity and satisfaction regarding their helping work. Moving from compassion fatigue towards compassion satisfaction involves employing self-care strategies that manage stress and defend against compassion fatigue which allow attention to be focused instead on quality of life and the aspects of our work that are rewarding. Learning about compassion satisfaction reconnected me with the many times in my work that I have experienced this in the past (landscape of identity) and how it offers a more agentic reauthoring of narratives around working in challenging situations (landscape of action) (Mate et al., 2024). Reducing professional isolation is also helpful. I will return to this in the next theme on connectedness. New insights into self-care in working with migrant cohorts were also gained through learning about Bath's (2015) traumawise care approach as a more boundaried way to work with clients without having to feel responsible for providing total solutions. Recommitment to self-care brings movement to a landscape of action (Mate et al., 2024) and further strengthens a narrative of hope and agency.

#### **Theme 4: Connectedness and collaboration in practice**

Brimrose & Brown (2019) speak to the need for careers practitioners to adapt their practices and acquire new skills and competences to support clients with navigating significant transformations including increased migration, rapid technological changes and new forms of employment. These changes continue to significantly impact on career guidance counsellor processes and practices with multi-dimensional and cumulative impacts on professional identity. They also identify evidence of the development of professional identity through storytelling and sensemaking narratives with conversations amongst practitioners switching between three perspectives of 'skill development, the structures and contexts within which skills are developed, and careers (narratives) and identities' (Brimrose & Brown, 2019, p.766).

Bimrose and Brown (2019, p.766) identify five themes that emerged from practitioner participants on an online learning course: learning from others, the role of the community of interest, shifting professional identities, feelings of isolation, and the effects on organisations (p.766), all of which resonate strongly for me. This inquiry has brought to light a hidden narrative of loneliness and understanding that this is a consequence of changing structures which led to a lessening of connection with guidance colleagues. The storytelling narrative career counselling lens (McMahon et al, 2012) made visible that experiencing connectedness is integral to my own well-being and identity construction.

My decision to intentionally increase my connectedness with the guidance counselling community offered a strategy to change this narrative of isolation through connecting with

colleagues and attending professional association conferences and events. I also attended the recent inaugural networking event for the National Lifelong Guidance strategy 2024-2030 (Department of Education, 2023) where I experienced strong connectedness with the broader guidance counselling tribe. Becoming more active on LinkedIn also increased connectedness with the virtual guidance counselling community.

Using narrative self-inquiry reconnected me with past positive experiences of being a sole guidance counsellor within a multi-function team from previous roles. It also reconnected me with personal strengths including a capacity to collaborate and agentically create new experiences of team with non-guidance FET colleagues. Engaging in collaborative practice with FET colleagues I experienced that 'synergy created through collaboration can also trigger new ideas, initiatives and new ways of doing things which can work to the benefit of citizens' (Sultana, 2008, p.26). This has led to the co-creation of resources and approaches to working with migrant cohorts as well as innovating a person-centred pathway for young male early school leavers, giving them access to apprenticeships (McSweeney, 2024). In the process, this has further strengthened my narrative of hope and agency.

## Discussion and implications for practice

This narrative inquiry self-study brings attention to how the need to adapt practice rapidly in response to structural changes impacts on professional identity and wellbeing. The experience of reforms to the FET sector and the Russia-Ukraine war provide particular examples, in the context of increased migration, rapid technological changes, and new forms of employment that this need for adaption is likely to continue (Brimrose & Brown, 2019). The issue of moral distress is particularly notable and worthy of further research in the guidance field.

This research also raises questions about how practitioners should be resourced appropriately to manage these kinds of challenges and transitions effectively. This inquiry points to the need to provide 'places' and 'spaces' for experienced practitioners to reflect on their own experiences and demonstrates how access to postgraduate professional development can enable reclaiming of one's professional identity (Neary, 2014). Some areas of focus are offered including working congruently with values, attending to self-care, increasing connectedness, and working collaboratively. Attention is also drawn to structural issues including the need for investment in resources and CPD for practitioners.



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