**Pre-occupations with identity ; an exploration of the relationship between identity/ies and career or career path through the examination of the stories of women of ambiguous identity.**

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the relationship between who we believe ourselves to be and what we do in our lives; our career. It is an examination of the relationship between personal and career identity, and the meso space between the personal and public worlds. Through the examination of the lives of three women as told in their own words and refections, I identified themes and threads which seemed to have been prevalent in their lives and which were, in different ways, resolved in what they chose to do and how they found their settlement. This research contributes to our further understanding of why people choose to do what they do and that illusive factor, vocation, quest and more broadly job satisfaction, and relates to my interest in and practice of career counselling. It poses the question of what is that thought, issue, concern or illusive missing part that is there like a phantom in the background of our lives; the spectre in every chapter of our lives whom we both fear and embrace, invite in and throw out? As well as being that notion that we may spend our lives chasing like a child with a butterfly, I argue that it is also about who we believe ourselves to be; not only what we choose to do but our very essence of selfhood.

A pre-occupation with identity was evident in these particular stories perhaps because their identity/ies were complex and to some extent ambiguous. Other threads in these particular stories were clear too, and it was in the pattern created in the tapestry made from these threads that these participants found the meaning of their stories. Moreover as the relationship between personal and career identity is explored some thoughts on the importance of this relationship is proposed with respect to career counselling practice.

This research explores the stories of three women. They are different stories connected by experiences of first or second generation migration, ambiguous identities, belonging and otherness. I also connect the stories as I am one of the women, my cousin is another and the third is my friend. Our stories, like a dance, came together and moved apart in this research. I invited them to take part because they had asked questions about themselves as I had, and they had a desire to make sense of their stories and careers. The questions posed in this research are therefore about the meaning we make of our careers and moreover whether our struggles with identity and belonging have been reflected in them. My interest is both personal and professional as this research serves both my personal interest in our lives and careers, and my professional concern as a practitioner about the development of career counselling practice to meet the needs of clients.

Stories, rather than being an undisturbed recording that can be switched on at the asking, are a process of reconstruction or re-membering, and of meaning making of the past from the present. The search for and interpretation of meaning (Bruner,1990) informed the methodology and analysis of this research. I did not seek a ‘truthful account’, accurate in its telling, but rather what a memory and story means to the teller in its telling. However I did not comfortably embrace this methodology from the start. Having been schooled initially in positivist and theoretically objective methodologies in my early career I was also aware of my own desire for answers and for a tidying up of untidy stories and lives. I found in this research that this propensity for clarifying, ordering and establishing a structure was also part of my story and search for meaning.

The position of the work is in that shared space between the private world and public arena. It is the space I refer to as ‘meso’ in a person’s life within which other elements reside that bridge the personal and public such as family and community. It is illustrated by what Jung (1938) calls *persona*, the role or mask that is worn or inhabited in this space shared between the private and public worlds. This is the space that is explored in the stories of the three of us for insight into the psychosocial factors that may have shaped it, and within which personal and career identities play, shaping each other and the stories that are told.

The methodology is auto/biographical. I began the research where my thoughts and questions began, with my own story. This research was neither autobiographical nor biographical, it was an interplay between the two. The / both connects and divides (Merrill and West, 2009). For my own life story I reflected upon images, memories, collage and discussion about my life and career. The stories of my co-participants, gathered through loosely structured interview and using artefacts, poems and family histories, are rich in themselves but their intersection with my own story is also part of the heuristic nature of the methodology. The interviews, lasting one to two hours, were recorded and fully transcribed, and those transcripts shared with my co-participants for accuracy. A second interview, after a period of reflection on the transcription was conducted with one of them. In this follow-up interview questions were shaped by events and elements in the story that were of particular interest and were then able to be explored further. With the other participant a full weekend of discussion followed the interview, which brought in other family members, reflections and stories. Before transcribing the interviews I listened to them many times and made notes about the tone, nuance and other non-verbal cues. I recalled how the conversation felt. I noted the dynamics and relational cambers in the conversation and the environment with all the external influences that brought to the event. What follows is a summary of the participants and their stories.

**The Offcomedon**

The word used here will be unfamiliar to many. It is a Yorkshire word that means ‘the outsider’ or someone who has joined the community from elsewhere. This is the term I use for myself. As I read my reflections and thought about my story, this is the word that seemed to capture what it was like being me as I grew up. As Horsdal (2012) points out, part of the human experience is to be able to experience time and space as a continuum; to relive and re-experience the past in the present and project through fantasy and daydream into the future. She uses the term ‘autonoesis’ to refer to this level of consciousness which is more than memory, and this I propose is the process that I engaged with in the telling of my story.

As a participant in this research, and also the researcher, I was aware that the nature of the material exploring my own life would be ontologically different to that collected through interviews with the other participants. I had a range of options of how to approach this and these, as well as the rationale for the approach taken, are explored in chapter three. Ultimately I explored my story in two ways. The first were written reflections and the second was the process of collage making.

The first approach undertaken at the beginning of this doctoral research journey, was that I reflected upon my own life and memories. When I thought about my early life in particular, my memories were illustrated by images. These non-verbal cues were powerful. I decided to use them to frame my reflections. Here are some of them.

Small pale hand

The first image I recalled was that of my small pale hand in the very large, very black hand of a man called Ali. When I was very young my family and I lived in a small Sudanese town called Shambhat, near Omdurman. Ali was I believe originally from the Dinka tribe in southern Sudan and, as such, possibly as much a foreigner in this northern Arab town as we were. He was very tall and very black. His teeth were so white in comparison to his face that they looked almost luminous. We were different. Although I am sure I was too young to put the thoughts and feelings into words, the feeling was that this hand, mine, would always be with me. It was small but would not always be so. The other hand would not always be with me. Perhaps this was the beginnings of my awareness of me as an individual, of identity or aloneness. It was certainly my first awareness of the difference between me and others.

The Curtsey

The second image is that of a department store in Salisbury, Wiltshire. I was about 12 and was facing four girls from school. They were bowing and curtseying (we had learnt how to do this at school the previous week) and chanting, ‘Princess Anne, Princess Anne…!’ I was horrified and turned and ran. I do not remember if I was on my own but I think so. I do not remember what happened next. I think the incident stemmed from a discussion in the classroom about my name and background. My family name was long and hard to pronounce. My father had told me with pride that when people call you names such as ‘pakki’ of ‘nigger’ it showed only ignorance. Our family, he told me, were in fact one of the ruling elite in Sri Lanka and my grandfather had been one of the key figures in the process of winning independence for the country from the British. When taunted I was not to react angrily but to calmly explain the facts about Sri Lanka and about our name and family. I had done this in the class room and the teacher had been impressed. The girls however were not.

The introduction

The third image considered here was that of my new classroom in a convent school in Dumfries, Scotland. Standing at the front of a small room I was greeted (well looked at anyway) by 20 girls sitting behind individual wooden desks. I looked back. The teacher (Mother Mary Joseph), introduced me (paused for the giggles that followed my name) and announced that I was one of the winning team on the Young Scientist of the Year TV competition. Silence. Not only was I a challenge to the hugely popular, top of the class, Bridget, I was English and coloured.

Collage

My reflections were interesting, even revealing, but gave little insight into how my adult life had unfolded. My options were broad. I could have written a more comprehensive autobiographical account of my life and thoughts. I could have recorded an interview with a third party about my life. An experience of the use of collage introduced me to a new way to explore thoughts and meaning and encouraged me to consider this approach

Epistemologically, collage is a constructivist approach to linking experiential knowing and understanding with the action of choosing and placing of pictures, images or other artefacts. As Butler-Kisber and Poldma explain, collage and other forms of arts-inquiry ‘are a means of making tacit ideas explicit and makes new insights possible for both the researcher and the research audience’ (2010:2)

Furthermore, for my own story the use of collage had an additional appeal. What seemed to emerge from my initial reflections was a recurring story of mixture, of difference and of marginalisation. Collage offered me a medium and research method that embodied much of these elements to my story; different fragments from different sources placed together to construct an image that bears no particular allegiance to one source. Both the process and the product seem to provide an opportunity for the embodiment of my story and my interpretation of that story in relation to the research question.

When the collage was complete I presented it and discussed both the result and the process with a third party and recorded and transcribed that conversation.

The analysis of my own story, narrated through image, reflective writing, collage making and discussion, proposed themes that were: separateness, being an outsider, mixed heritage and unknown lineage, pre-occupation, concerns over methodology, recognition, and ‘the eraser’. Separateness in this context was the realisation of my selfhood, my uniqueness and how that was indicated by the separateness of others. The concept of difference appeared also to permeate the story, in reflections, memories of images and in the making of the collage later. These themes concur with another theme, that of being an outsider. It was illustrated by a series of new encounters, each of which highlighted a difference or otherness between me and them. Such lack of fit is echoed in the work of Said (1999), Bhabha (2004) and Lorde (2007), and highlights the importance to a young person (and an adult) of fitting in, being un-noteworthy and without stigma (Goffman, 1963).

The issue of mixed heritage and also unknown lineage was a thread through all parts of my story, which narrated an identity that was neither one thing nor another; a narrative identity and later career identity that straddled cultures, communities and professions. This is different from otherness, it is almost anonymity; a not-belonging to either side or sides. There is herein a broader critique of the tidiness and default of the binary; male/female, north/south, rich/poor, in or out. Echoing Bhabha’s (2004) suggestion of a liminal space *between*, as more mixed people claim their space such categories may be increasingly under scrutiny. In the collage, my mixed background and nature gained a prominence perhaps because of the visual impact of pictures of my parents and grandparents, but also the image of the Bluefooted Booby (which appears to have been made from all kinds of different creatures) and the mixed bouquet where the contingent flowers complement each other; the whole bunch being greater than the sum of its parts. There was resonance too with turning away from one identity in order to embrace another with the guilt, hesitancy and pain that can carry. Subjectivity is multifaceted when the identity of the person is not clear, and remains under construction. It is within this conflict that a pre-occupation with clarity and resolution may be found. The use of such a subjective and ambiguous method as collage not surprisingly then elicits feelings of insecurity and concern for me in search of the ratification of clarity.

Recognition has been and remains an important issue for me as is that of belonging and my search for it as well as my slight discomfort and mistrust of it. Honneth (1995) proposed that identity is dependent upon recognition; we are no one until someone calls us. However, my contribution to society in terms of work and career has been fractured and difficult to define or recognise.

Finally in my story was the essence of a pre-occupation; a thread which is identifiable early and which carries through to the present day. The pre-occupation called upon all the other themes (Savickas, 2001) in this analysis and could be summarised as a search for clarity of identity and purpose. It embraced other themes from separateness, otherness or being an outsider, to the felt ambiguity of heritage. Savickas (2011) used the term pre-occupation to explain this thread which Adler (1923) would have recognised as the prototype or self-ideal in the mind of a young child, which clarifies their overall goal of turning felt minuses (inferiorities) into desired pluses. Taylor (1992) called this a quest. This may or may not be conscious; it may be only by the processes of psychoanalysis, career construction counselling or indeed research that it is recognised. Savickas’ assertion that in career ‘we actively master what has been passively suffered’ (2011:33) I believe explains my own pre-occupation. The quest has not been to find the perfect match in career between my skills and interests and a particular set of requirements, rather it has been a process of trying on a series of masks, roles, uniforms, career identities, trying to find the one that fits, that defines me and which bestows some clarity.

The meaning therefore to me of my story was the search for clarity of identity and purpose, and it appeared to be evident in both my personal and work life. What was clear in the process of making and discussing the collage was that in career at least some of this clarity was found. The processes of becoming an academic, a university lecturer and a manager allows for a variety of relationships, roles and identities to co-exist. Moreover my role as a careers practitioner, supporting others in their navigation of career does demonstrate the notion of ‘actively mastering’. Perhaps even more so my current engagement with this research demonstrates the same.

**The quiet multilinguist**

My first co-participant was my friend G, a Jewish woman. She is a friend of mine and the wife of an Anglican Priest who she married at the age of 50. She currently works as a lecturer and quality control officer at a Jewish college in London, but her early story is one of movement from one country to another; always the new girl and the ‘other’. The telling of the story was as rich as the content. She rarely used the first person and was largely pragmatic, philosophical, resigned and evidently comfortable being different and to living on the periphery of a number of communities. She rarely (until the very end of my second interview with her) referred to feelings, relationships or love but emphasised responsibilities, acceptance and change.

G’s father was one of the first Israeli diplomats after the end of World War Two. She spent the majority of her childhood in countries other than Israel including England, Madagascar, Finland and France. She went to school in England and in Paris before returning to Israel to do her National Service and then going to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She worked in Higher Education in Israel for many years before moving to London when her parents, who were becoming frail, needed her care. When both her parents had passed away she remained living in London, working and teaching at the college.

In G’s story the themes that I identified were: personal identity, national identity, responsibility and belonging, loyalty, passion and emotions, career, and teaching adults.

Her national identity was chosen for her by her parents, ensuring that she was born in the UK ‘for obvious reasons’ so that she would not have German nationality. This sculpting of identity was continued by ensuring that she did not speak German and as a consequence had no ‘mother tongue’. I found myself wondering what that meant for the early development of personal identity in G. Her difference was clear from a very early age, first to her mother and father in terms of the languages they spoke, and then from new friends and acquaintances. However she does not criticise them for ensuring that English was her first language, rather she sympathised with them and with the young G for trying to reduce the language burden on her. Similarly she did not say how it felt or that she wished it had been different. In terms of Honneth’s (1995) notions of recognition she was loved, had self-confidence and a clear belief in her own worth. As for self-respect she was supported by the knowledge that she and her family had equal rights to take part in society. This had not been the case during the Holocaust of course, which her parents had survived and which was an historical, political and cultural backdrop to her own childhood. The strong loyalty to Israel and the Jewish nation was, she made clear, part of who they were as a family and what they stood for. This strong national identity may also have had an impact on the third factor; self-esteem. Although moving from country to country she may not have had the recognition of school mates, but she made clear that this was achieved by her in her national service. This, she asserted was an important and transformative experience and connected her to other Israelis and to the history of the Jewish nation.

The concept of Alfred Adler’s prototype (1923) of the self-ideal a child aspires to become, may also offer some insight into the early years of G and their impact on her life. As the child of an Israeli diplomat her national identity was strongly Israeli, with also a clear sense of Britishness. She makes clear the importance of ‘not letting the side down’ and takes her responsibility as an Israeli very seriously. Socially constructed truths (Gergen, 2000) about what it meant to be Israeli and Jewish would have been strongly evident in the day to day discourses of the household. Nonetheless her personal identity was less distinct and she recounted the experience many time of being different and other as she moved from one country to another as a child. No matter how many languages she learnt she still had no ‘mother tongue’. She appeared to have carried and in fact embraced this otherness throughout her life so that despite her clarity of national affiliation and loyalty it was tinged always with the recognition that she ‘has a different biography’ to other Israelis, other Jews, other women. Her Adlerian prototype might be characterised by national loyalties and contribution, but also an embracing and mastering of otherness and difference. She confirmed this in her story. Perhaps these two factors illustrate a pervading thread in her story, her pre-occupation; embracing and mastering otherness within a context of national and religious responsibility. In her career she avoided stereotypic identity. Awareness of the arguments around Jewish feminism may have confirmed her rejection of teaching until she found her own way of doing it, and, for example, rejecting ballet before it rejected her. She used the metaphor of a mosaic of identities; creating a unique piece of art from all the identities she has had, has today and will have in the future. This is reminiscent of Winnicott’s notion of ‘playing’ which he posed was synonymous with creativity (1971) in a space in which G could experience an evolving process of becoming, and a recognition that whatever she becomes it will be different to others, unique to her. Congruent with Bandura’s social learning theory (1986) and Kelly’s (1955) notion of personality and identity not being fixed but emerging through interactions with the world around us, G appeared to treat her identity as a project to be savoured but probably unfinished. Savickas (2011:33) may have concluded that indeed within career she has ‘actively mastered what was passively suffered’, teaching as she now does in a Jewish college. She has not undone or corrected the ‘hole in the heart’ (Taylor, 1992), but has not only learnt to live with it but also to celebrate it.

G’s agenda seemed to be to talk about facts; what happened when and to a small extent why (the story and the plot). She skilfully kept the conversation at an arm’s length from feelings and emotions, intimate relationships and certainly away from any acknowledgment of pain or suffering (possible meaning). In the literature about narrative research there is much written about being mindful of the power dynamics (Josselson,2011), the relative agendas and the authorship of the story (Hollway and Jefferson,2000; Merrill and West, 2009). There are possible explanations for this apparent avoidance of emotions. First she is a private person who, although a friend, I was also one of her husband’s parishioners and so she may have been aware that some boundaries needed to be maintained. It is even possible that her husband discussed this with her. His presence in the house, and the location of the interviews, was certainly a reminder of this. Secondly in the transcription and analysis of the interviews I was cognisant of her explanation of the approach she had always used to manage new relationships and situations, by staying quiet and;

waited for people to come to me, waited for to know where I was, I understood the layout, you know, understood the dynamics…

It may be that at the time of these interviews and with the boundaries she felt were also necessary, this was where she was still, waiting. But over and above these possible explanations at the time of the interviews, I also wondered whether for a first generation post-holocaust Jew there was an unwritten and perhaps unconscious reticence to complain, particularly about an issue relating to being Jewish (Langer, 1991;Levi, 1969).

In the second interview there was more talk of emotions, although avoiding sentimentality, and certainly there was no expression of emotion in her voice, demeanour or discourse. Such acknowledgment of emotion or feeling was in relation to work rather than relationships. She shared the joy of teaching adults in her current position as lecturer in a Jewish college. Earlier she had robustly avoided any emotional talk in relation to ballet, which although introduced into the conversation as a ‘passion’ she called an ‘interest’. Later she got closer to the emotiveness of dance but did not go so far as to talk about emotional engagement.

Despite a number of attempts there was a real reluctance to talk about relationships, with her parents, her sister and her husband. It was clear that she was there to talk about her life and her career. That had to be respected and in no way did I wish to make her feel uncomfortable or to exploit our friendship. Another researcher would have found different meaning in this work (Josselson, 2011). The backdrop to these conversations was that of two friends talking and the roles we were playing (Goffman, 1959) were not always clearly defined; they were overlapping and sometimes ambiguous. Her avoidance of talking about relationships may have been her way of maintaining her ‘participant’ and my ‘researcher’ masks. Although the transcripts were shared and discussed, there was little appetite by G to explore underpinning feelings or by me to press her to do so.

My interpretation of the meaning of G’s story was that she had navigated her own life around expectations and loyalties and had embraced otherness as something to be valued, because it gave her a ‘liminal space’ (Bhabha, 2004:5) to see other worlds and to create an identity that was wholly hers. In terms of career she acknowledged that she has also tried to straddle aptitudes and interests that were in the family; teaching, law and international relations. Where she had found real joy was in their resolution in her current job; a lecturer but also a quality assurance officer in a Jewish college where people from many countries come to learn about the beliefs and traditions of the Jewish faith and culture. Her pre-occupation continues. In much of her story she used the phrase ‘to this very day’, which suggested the continuation of the pre-occupation of embracing otherness and of resolving the multifaceted nature of her identity; the thread which has created a pattern of her making and linked her past, present and future selves.

**Forgiving, forgiveness and changing the world**

My second participant in this research was S. She is a mixed race woman, and my half cousin. Her story telling was a rich, human mix of the pain of racism, but also, agentically, of a determination to work her way through this to some more ‘authentic’ identity, chosen, and defined by the complexity of her lived experience. Her story also offered an impression of someone who wanted to find a sense of belonging, but often had a feeling of being more complex and different. S tells of the issues of her experience of belonging, both the good and the constraining and there is some insight into early feelings of rejection in her relationship with her mother and later her father.

In contrast to G’s story, this one was full of emotion, intimate and painful stories and also some shared history with me. The themes that came from her story, shared through transcribed interviews, discussions before, around and after the interviews, pictures and her own words in poetry were: history and place, faith, identity, the sense of the family, her relationship with her mother and her father, racial struggles and career.

S’s career path may have been as much a product of the time as her own struggles with identity. The 1960s were a time of social unrest during which many of the macro-structures of society were collapsing. The public issues of war, women’s rights and immigration were reflected in the private troubles of people and of young adults such as S (Wright-Mills, 1959). In particular for S the social structures that had given her childhood some clear shape in a context of cultural ambiguity, such as faith, family, gender and career, were losing their reliability and hold. This provided her with freedom, but also exacerbated the tension between her and her parents. The predominance of the individual in a postmodern society and the increasingly complex navigation of the working world (Frosh,1991;Burkitt,1991;Bauman, 2000; Alcoff, 2006) provided S with options that 10 years previously she would not have had, that is to ‘just be myself’. But in the absence of other anchors, cultural, racial, religious and social, it was a difficult and at times a painful goal. The goal itself appears to have also been to help others (particularly women) who were marginalised, which she did in different ways for many years. She tells of her determination to challenge the simplistic groupings that othered her, feelings echoed by Lorde (2007), Heschel (1983) and others who pointed out the inadequacies found even within movements that purported to support the disadvantaged. Reference to black feminists, gay black men, Jewish women and others straddling two or more socially disadvantaging factors explains that human diversity, contrary to Wright-Mills’ homogenous groupings, is complicated. There appeared to be a responsibility for S to act on behalf of others which is resonant of Simone Weil (1947), putting her own wellbeing far down her list of priorities. She pointed out that this quest was often to the detriment of her own welfare as she often felt ‘unboundaried’. The role she had adopted early in life as the ‘mug’ who always wanted to do the right thing for others, took its toll. The prototype or self-ideal that Adler (1923) may have identified was cast early as the person who makes things better, the peacemaker, the fixer of all that is wrong, the young woman who would ‘change the world’; a quest she clearly followed for much of her life. The dual goals of ‘being myself’ and saving people were perhaps untenable but that seemed to be the meaning of her story as she told it. The tension between these was perhaps only resolved by the gradual realisation that the person she most needed to save was herself, particularly her younger self.

This is my interpretation of the meaning of her story. She told how she was later able to embrace her creativity, celebrate her mixedness and flexible identity so that she is most at home in heterogeneity. Moreover she claimed that this is better than being ‘pure’; it is more healthy and ultimately more real. She explained that she no longer felt the need to apologise for who she is or is not, and the weight of responsibility to ‘change the world’ although not relinquished entirely is now shared. Much of S’s story was a product of the times in which she emerged from childhood into adulthood; making sense of the world around her as best she could with all the contradictions and missing pieces that there were. However despite her apparent rejection of her early grounding in family, religion and social structure she reconstructed those foundations in her own way throughout her life. Her own life and family had an alternative structure; she was a single mother and then in a same sex relationship but still included her daughter’s father in the mix. She told how she embraces spirituality, often expressed in her poetry and art, and that she has become part of a strong and visible community of like-minded people; a mixture of people who also inhabited spaces between communities and cultures and who felt marginalised. In S’s story perhaps more than the other two in this research, the boundary between personal and career identity was particularly blurred. In her story she stated that it was not that she did not want to work, just that she did not want a career. The idea that a part of life could be separate from her ideals and way of living was an anathema.

The analysis of the material was holistic (Merrill and West, 2009) and tracked our engagement as in a dance between us, and the meaning that made for me in my interpretation of the stories. Finding meaning in these lives and careers came from the particular themes within each story but also the shared meaning between them. The three stories presented windows into very different lives and careers, but also into recognisable and shared struggles and resolutions. Although personal agency is at the heart of each story, this is set within and shaped by the family, history and communities in which each of us grew. Such influences, also found in the meso space, share it with career as they also provide a conduit between the micro (private) and macro (public) worlds.

The work of Jung (1938), Adler (1923) and later of Savickas (2011) provided some theoretical heavy lifting in understanding the relationship between personal identities and the longer term goals crafted in the interface between private and public space in which I propose career inhabits. Each was invited into the research to comment upon and to help to illuminate the processes at work in this shared space. They helped to understand the relationship between the threads and themes in these stories and how they create a tapestry of meaning for the teller.

In our stories where personal identity was ambiguous and public space offered little certainly, it was career that provided a stage whereon identity was resolved. It was this relationship between personal and career identity that emerged as the key argument for a counter narrative for career counselling. Understood within the dynamic space of the meso world of culture, communities and history, it offers an alternative to neoliberal individualistic, outcome driven practice (Irving, 2013). At its heart it is an acknowledgement of the relationship between who we believe ourselves to be and what we do in our lives.

The three stories that are explored in this paper illustrate lives lived in complex times of political, social and cultural changes and with a backdrop of post war and post-colonial diasporas. As current conflicts continue to have impacts upon those displaced and those in host nations, and the ambiguities in identity and belonging of second and third generation peoples threatens to lead to alienation, exclusion and despair. The understanding of these three stories and their peculiarities may offer insight into issues beyond the scope of career or career counselling.

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