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Career life as a game: an overlooked metaphor for successful career transitions

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ABSTRACT

Meeting the psychological, social, and economic challenges of career transitions requires people to be increasingly flexible and hardy. In this article, we propose that envisioning one's life as a game can foster well-being, coping strategies, and success with career transitions. The SuperBetter approach (McGonigal, 2015. *Superbetter: A revolutionary approach to getting stronger, happier, braver and more resilient*. Penguin) is presented as a metaphor that can provide clients with a new perspective for their lives and career narratives. The way each component of this metaphor can contribute to individuals' well-being, motivation and success throughout career transitions is detailed. Implications for practice and research are discussed.



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The development of new technologies and globalisation has made the world of work more dynamic and volatile than ever (Pryor & Bright, 2011). As a result, career transitions are more frequent, unpredictable and challenging (Borgen & Edwards, 2019). Therefore, career clients are urged to develop their abilities to anticipate, adapt, cope with and recover from unexpected or daunting career transitions (Lent, 2013). In order to facilitate the acquisition of the needed skills, Hartung (2002) appealed to researchers and practitioners to further integrate play into career counselling approaches. However, his conception of play mostly appears related to that of leisure and its balanced integration with work, whereas play may encompass a broader set of activities and attitudes (Proyer, 2013; Winnicott, 1971). In this article we will focus on play and games as a practical metaphor for conceptualising life and career. Inkson and Amundson (2002) emphasised how metaphors can be useful to broaden the client's perspective when it comes to envisioning their career path, and they stress the need to offer new types of metaphors to represent career in a constantly changing workplace. Subsequently, Pryor and Bright (2009) highlighted the benefits of the game metaphor to help career clients understand the complex nature of today's world of work. Given the tremendous rise of video games in Western societies (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2017), it seems legitimate to propose including them in this metaphor (Rochat et al., 2017; Rochat & Armengol, 2020). In the present article, we posit the SuperBetter approach (McGonigal, 2015) as a meaningful way to operationalise the game metaphor into career counselling settings and we examine how each component of this method can help individuals experience successful career transitions. Moreover, we provide concrete suggestions on how to use it with career clients depending on client characteristics.

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Narrative approaches in career counselling

Globalisation and the rise of new technologies have created a world of work characterised by instability and uncertainty, making career transitions more frequent and challenging (Borgen & Edwards, 2019; Savickas et al., 2009). Within this context, many scholars have emphasised the limitation of the traditional trait-based vocational guidance practices (e.g. Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Holland, 1959) and have proposed new career paradigms and approaches that better honour the complexity of both the individuals, their environments, and reciprocal individual-environment interactions (e.g. Guichard, 2005; Patton & McMahon, 2014; Pryor & Bright, 2011; Savickas, 2005; Vondracek et al., 2014). These new theories emphasise the way people build their identity and give meaning to their career paths through the story they tell themselves (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011; McMahon & Watson, 2013; Patton, 2008), and share a common interest in helping individuals to convey, coherent, fruitful, and enabling career stories (Cochran, 1997).

The main career challenge of the twenty-first century is to build a vocational identity that can be adapted to navigate an increasingly fast moving and uncertain world of work (Pryor & Bright, 2011). Such an identity is presented by Savickas (2005) as a structured story that explains, “how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow” (p. 58). It is now well established that adults envision their reality and find meaning through the stories they tell themselves on the basis of the ways they organise and interpret their memories (McAdams, 1993, 2013). Storytelling can have deep and concrete impacts on individuals’ lives (McMahon & Watson, 2013). For example, being able to recount a coherent narrative about one’s existence has been positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively correlated with depression (Pals, 2006). Moreover, the sense of coherence (see Antonovsky, 1993) derived from such storytelling is acknowledged as a core facet of meaning in life, along with purpose and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). However, the ability to perceive oneself as a continuous whole in the past, present and future can be threatened by major adversities and disruptions, such as life and career transitions (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). Under such circumstances, the individual may find it difficult to tell a consistent self-narrative, which has been associated with negative affect and poor mental health (Bauer et al., 2008). This suggests the need for career counsellors to support their clients in developing and maintaining a cohesive and stable identity through the telling of a coherent story about themselves and the world around them, so as to help them adjust to the numerous career challenges and transitions they will encounter (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011), and to build their future identities (McMahon & Watson, 2013).

Among the various storytelling approaches that have blossomed, one focuses on metaphors, because “we all use metaphors, not just as an illustrative use of language but also a way of understanding the world” (Inkson & Amundson, 2002, p. 100). In fact, as conceptual frameworks, metaphors hold a deep influence on individuals’ thoughts and behaviours (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), which is also true when it comes to professional paths (Inkson, 2002). Metaphors have been suggested as a promising way to help people identify new perspectives, opportunities and actions, as well as bringing coherence in confusing career situations (Amundson, 2015; Amundson & Thrift, 2008; McMahon, 2007; Pryor & Bright, 2008, 2009). Inkson and Amundson (2002) proposed that counsellors may exploit these “pre-determined metaphors to encourage individuals to consider their own career and options creatively” (p. 105). To this end, they offer 10 archetypal metaphors for career that can be used to help clients adopt different perspectives on their career path: the career as (1) a journey, (2) an inheritance, (3) a fit, (4) a sequence of seasons, (5), growth, (6) creative work, (7) a network, (8) a resource, (9) a story, and (10) a cultural artifact. “Career as a game” is not mentioned in this list, although it appears to be used by both practitioners and clients during career counselling sessions (Woldendorp, 2019).

Career life as a game: an overlooked metaphor

Play and games in career counselling

As a cultural universal among human beings and animals, play has long been proposed as an effective activity for stimulating learning, motivation, curiosity and pleasure in career exploration

endeavours (Miller & Knippers, 1992; Uy, 2019), as well as an essential step for the development of vocational interests at a young age (Vondracek et al., 2014). Moreover, Pryor and Bright (2009) proposed games as a useful metaphor to support clients in understanding the chaotic nature of reality that is simultaneously organised (i.e. the rules in the game) and subject to luck and unpredictability; and individual actions that can help to minimise losses and maximise gains. Envisioning career as a game is also likely to sustain motivation and perseverance during career transitions.

A defining feature of games is that when we play, we do not try to avoid discomfort or constraints, instead we embrace them, and we recognise that they are essential to the experience of “fun” (McGonigal, 2015). As a consequence, individuals are more likely to address the challenge at hand promptly and with enthusiasm when they play than in ordinary life (see Webster & Martocchio, 1993). At a time where career paths are strewn with difficulties and obstacles that lead to increased vulnerability (Urbanaviciute et al., 2019) adopting such a vantage point on career development might result in considerable changes in the way people cope with their life and career transitions. Following the unprecedented rise of video games in the Western world, McGonigal (2015) created the “SuperBetter” approach, in order to help individuals in envisioning their life as a game, and subsequently adopt the same mindset and ardour in life that they have when they play, even under difficult and unwanted circumstances. Recently, Rochat et al. (2017) proposed that McGonigal’s (2015) game metaphor could promote self-efficacy beliefs in one’s ability to demonstrate resilience during career transitions. More recently, Rochat and Armengol (2020) suggested that this metaphor could also be used to make career exploration and development tasks more invigorating for clients who love video games.

The SuperBetter approach

In a nutshell, the SuperBetter approach (McGonigal, 2015) invites individuals to no longer see themselves as a regular person facing demanding circumstances, but as a hero who has to achieve a mission. Seven principles (or game rules) are suggested to unfold the metaphor: (1) focusing on the opportunities offered by the situation rather than on its threats (the “challenge mindset”), (2) setting an ambitious goal (the “mission”) and completing fun “quests” to achieve it, (3) identifying one’s “superpowers” and using them to achieve the mission, (4) finding multiple strategies to battle the “bad guys” that may hinder the success of the mission, (5) executing small positive actions to experience agreeable emotions throughout the journey (“power-ups”), (6) planning and celebrating the breakthrough moments in the pursuit of the mission (“epic wins”) or victories in parallel areas, and (7) recruiting “allies” to help ensure the success of the mission.

In her book, McGonigal (2015) has described how these rules coherently bring together several concepts and results from the field of positive psychology, which is the scientific “study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). She refers to Drach-Zahavy and Erez’s (2002) study to explain that adopting a “challenge mindset” increases the ability cope with stressful situations. The conception and completion of quests, as well as their progressive intensification, is posited as a path to develop optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1992), hope (Snyder, 2002) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). The process of endorsing superpowers is linked to the concept of character strengths (i.e. positive trait-like qualities and virtues that are morally valued in all cultures [Peterson & Seligman, 2004]), the identification and daily use of which contribute to well-being (Linley et al., 2010).

Spotting bad guys and developing several strategies to fight them is associated with the concept of “psychological flexibility”, which can be defined as the ability to “recognize and adapt to various situational demands; shift mindsets or behavioural repertoires when these strategies compromise personal or social functioning” (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010, p. 865). The benefits of enabling power-ups are explained through Fredrickson’s (1998) broaden-and-build theory which posits that positive emotions contribute “to broaden an individual’s momentary thought–action repertoire,

which in turn has the effect of building that individual's physical, intellectual, and social resources" (Fredrickson, 1998, p. 300). Finally, the process of recruiting allies is compared with capitalising on one's social support.

Preliminary research results have revealed that playing SuperBetter daily through the use of a smartphone application (SuperBetter, LLC, 2018) contributes to decreased anxiety and depressive symptoms among individuals with clinical levels of depression (Roepke et al., 2015). It has also reduced symptoms and increased optimism of young people suffering from unresolved concussions (Worthen-Chaudhari et al., 2017). In addition to these benefits, we suggest that SuperBetter can provide individuals with a useful metaphor that fosters the narration of coherent and meaningful stories about themselves and their careers. This, in turn, can allow them to demonstrate greater proactive behaviours, adaptability and resilience in their life and career transitions. To this end, we propose that career counsellors might suggest this specific metaphor "as a guiding image" (Amundson, 2015, p. 198) for their clients.

Application

A guiding image

Generally, using the SuperBetter game metaphor in career counselling implies that counsellors no longer envision clients as individuals who have to make a career choice or manage their career, but as heroes who have to accomplish a mission in meeting vocational needs. Under such circumstances, the reason for seeking career counselling (choosing/finding an occupation, better integrating job and family, accessing decent work, etc.) can be defined as the "mission" the person attempts to accomplish. Further correlates between the game metaphor and career transitions will now be developed in more detail.

Challenge mindset

Adopting a challenge mindset can help replace the anxiety that normally accompanies career transitions with a "sense of adventure" (Krumboltz, 2009, p. 146). In fact, games constitute a typical situation in which the feeling of uncertainty can amplify the experience of positive emotions (Bar-Anan et al., 2009), which can help undo the lingering, deleterious psychological and physiological effects of negative affect, such as discouragement or anxiety (Fredrickson et al., 2000) that may be triggered by career transitions (Paul & Moser, 2009). Moreover, starting from the definition of a personally relevant mission allows a client to adapt the game metaphor to different types of populations, regardless of their initial career situation or level of distress (see Wissing et al., 2021).

Bad guys

All the difficulties that hinder career decision-making (Gati et al., 1996), planning (Borgen & Maglio, 2007) or access to decent work (Blustein et al., 2019) can be thought of as "bad guys" that the career counselling process is going to tackle. Interestingly, all of the four types of reactions suggested for fighting the obstacles in the SuperBetter approach (i.e. resisting, anticipating, relativising, and positively reframing) were reported as helpful strategies to achieve a sense of well-being by people who had recently lost their job (Synard & Gazzola, 2019). Accordingly, these categories may be posited as providing a useful structure to encourage career clients to diversify their methods in addressing the barriers they are facing. Moreover, the mere fact of envisioning various possible behaviours to overcome an obstacle fosters the feeling of having a choice about how to react to one's life circumstances (Synard & Gazzola, 2019). Identifying multiple and heterogeneous coping strategies to address a single problem can help career clients develop a stronger sense of their internal "locus of control", which is an influential factor for making appropriate career decisions (Gadassi et al., 2012). It can also contribute to enhancing "work volition", defined as "the perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints" (Duffy et al., 2012, p. 292), which has been proposed

as a substantive concept to improve the sense of agency of marginalised human beings (Blustein et al., 2019). Encouraging people to envision numerous strategies to overcome their career challenges may contribute to the development of fruitful beliefs, coping behaviours and competences which lay the foundations for career adaptability (Savickas, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009).

Secret identity

In this context, both standardised and qualitative career counselling activities aimed at fostering self-knowledge about interests, characteristics, skills and values can be further defined as ways to discover a client's "superpower", and to serve as core resources to manage the transition (see Hirschi et al., 2018). The concept of character strengths emphasised in SuperBetter is also gaining prominence in the field of career counselling (Dik et al., 2015). Strength-focused career interventions have already demonstrated promising results in increasing self-efficacy (Owens et al., 2016) and self-esteem (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2014) among clients, both of which, in turn, are considered core protective factors in mitigating the negative effects of vocational indecision and indecisiveness (see Udayar et al., 2020, for a meta-analysis). Moreover, McGonigal's idea of drawing inspiration from admired people in order to identify new prospects for action is already present in Savickas's (2015) Career Construction Interview as a way to reflect clients' concerns and opportunities or to envision their "best possible self" (Meevissen et al., 2011) and act accordingly (Del Corso & Reh fuss, 2011).

Quests

With regards to career transitions, the concept of fun "quests" could be reinforced to facilitate the planning and realisation of career exploration and engagement tasks. In fact, the achievement of such quests is expected to foster optimism, hope and self-efficacy, which have been consistently demonstrated as protective factors for successful engagement in career exploration and decision-making activities (Santilli et al., 2017; Udayar et al., 2020). Moreover, the design and completion of such daily quests can encourage proactive motivation, which also appears to be a crucial factor for successful career transitions (Hirschi et al., 2013). In addition, transforming ordinary tasks into quests alters the orientation to career exploration from potentially "serious and lonely" (Uy, 2019, p. 71) to a fun activity. These attempts to customise vocational tasks to make them more personally significant can be associated also with the concept of "job crafting", which describes what employees do to "draw and redraw the task and relational boundaries of a job to make it a more positive and meaningful experience" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 197). Job crafting behaviours have been associated with increased professional satisfaction, engagement, and performance (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013).

Epic wins

Within career counselling activities, epic wins can be introduced as milestones signalling that clients are progressing toward their goals, which is especially relevant to career development in challenging times (Niles et al., 2010). Honouring the achievement of such turning points can reduce the tendency to disqualify the positive experience (Beck, 1979), mitigating the anxiety and depression that can otherwise accompany prolonged employment transitions (Paul & Moser, 2009). Moreover, taking time to plan and prepare for victories in other life domains when facing huge struggles in the career sphere can also be helpful. For example, Synard and Gazzola (2019) showed that having sources of identity other than work helped to allay the negative impact of job loss, by putting the whole life situation in a more balanced and larger perspective. This is particularly important when clients are unable to secure paid employment that represents a major interest or passion, in order to be economically viable, and need assistance from their counsellor to identify other ways to achieve that passion and find meaning, such as through hobbies (Borgen & Edwards, 2019)

Allies and power-ups

Within the context of career development, the reference to allies can be employed to identify the members of the client's personal and professional network who could provide significant help in the process. Social support has long been recognised as a major environmental resource for successful career decision-making (e.g. Jemini-Gashi et al., 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2014) and transitions (e.g. Borgen, 1999). Therefore, it is important to provide clients with a metaphor that will encourage them to capitalise on this valuable resource. For those who are in dire need of social support, it is worth noting that allies may be extended to include role models, as they can contribute to the development of career adaptability and resilience (Garcia et al., 2019). Finally, the concept of power-ups can be used to encourage people to engage in small constructive activities that help them do well, both physically and psychologically. In fact, experiencing related positive emotions is an important resource for managing one's career (Emmerling & Cherniss, 2003). For example, Synard and Gazzola (2019) found that self-care activities alleviated stress and contributed to the well-being of individuals who had lost their employment, as long as these were not used as a way to procrastinate regarding job search tasks.

Unfolding the metaphor

In the aforementioned context, the metaphor can also be utilised in a proactive manner, with clients who are contemplating an upcoming transition (such as students anticipating the transition from school to work or older workers facing the perspective of retirement) or in a reactive manner, with those who are currently in the midst of a transition (such as people who are unemployed). First, the career counsellor may start by mentioning that career development can sometimes be compared to a game. Based on the client's interest, the counsellor can then guide the client's discovery of all of the seven parts of the game. If needed, the counsellor can provide clients with additional information about the metaphor, or simply follow it up with a discussion of its relevance and implications for the client.

Second, selected concepts of the metaphor can be used to address specific client concerns or to explain career counselling processes and contents. In this case the career counsellor may choose to use or not the gaming label, depending on the profile of their client. For example, when working with a client unaware of the career decision-making process, the career counsellor may explain to them that making a choice is like setting an ambitious mission which can be achieved through small steps. Moreover, if the client appears reluctant to take steps toward the implementation of their career plan, the counsellor may simply ask them how they can make these tasks more interesting and relevant for them, in reference to the concept of "fun quests", but without explicitly mentioning it. This type of tailored intervention is likely to be very helpful and provides greater flexibility and spontaneity for the career counsellor. In both cases, as a narrative intervention, offering this metaphor must be used within a climate of respect, trust and collaboration, and in a way that supports the individual's autonomy (McMahon & Watson, 2013). In fact, the metaphor should also continue to evolve with the client once the counsellor has suggested it (Amundson, 2015).

Discussion

Strengths and limitations

In this article, we have outlined how encouraging clients to envision their career path as a game can have a favourable impact on their career transitions, by rendering their journey less threatening and more exciting, even under difficult circumstances. More specifically, as the SuperBetter approach encapsulates various resources recognised in the field of positive psychology, it appears likely to foster a greater awareness of the different components of the individuals' resources, coping

strategies, and well-being. Doing so can contribute to developing clients' playfulness – a trait that enables them “to frame or reframe everyday situations in a way such that they experience them as entertaining, and/or intellectually stimulating, and/or personally interesting” (Proyer, 2017, p. 114). Playfulness in adults is strongly associated with different facets of psychological and physical well-being, as well as with the commitment to and pursuit of intrinsically motivated goals, and the experience of positive emotions and flow (Proyer, 2013). Encouraging individuals to look at their situation in a playful way can thus be particularly relevant in the context of career transitions characterised by uncertainty where a strong motivation is crucial to success (Stoltz & Young, 2013). By acknowledging the inevitable suffering and difficulties that punctuate career paths and supporting clients to see their challenges from a new and empowering perspective, this metaphor may help them to reconcile both the positive and negative aspects of their complex experiences (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). Accordingly, this metaphor can encourage clients to develop what Lent (2013, p. 7) has defined as their “career-life preparedness”:

a healthy state of vigilance regarding threats to one's career well-being as well as alertness to resources and opportunities on which one can capitalize [that] can lead to the use of proactive strategies to manage barriers, build supports, and otherwise advocate for one's own career-life future.

Developing such career-life preparedness seems critical to help individuals adapt and endure in a changing and demanding world of work. In this sense, respectfully instilling the career-as-a-game metaphor appears to be an interesting way to catalyse the effect of the core ingredients of career counselling interventions, such as written exercises, individualised feedback, exploration of information, modelling, and support (Brown et al., 2003).

However, although play behaviours and games are considered universal (American Psychological Association, 2015) it is likely not to be the case with the video games references that are mostly meaningful in westernised societies. In fact, there are cultural differences in the ways that people play, which also appear to be the case with video games (Lee & Wohn, 2012). Moreover, McMahon et al. (2012) emphasised the presence of cultural limits in narrative approaches, which include the use of metaphors (Amundson, 2015). Therefore, the form, relevance, and benefits of the game metaphor introduced here is very likely to vary across cultures. In addition, Inkson and Amundson (2002) warned us against seeing the world only through one metaphor, as it can contribute to constraining as well as broadening an individual's perspective. For this reason, they advocate for “the use of multiple metaphors” (p. 105) when it comes to considering careers, so as to be able to choose the one with the most relevance. Following Amundson's (2015) suggestion, after applying the metaphor of the career as a game, clients should be encouraged to pick other metaphors, to explore their relevance. Similarly, Del Corso and Rehfuß (2011) highlighted that there still is a debate about whether individuals should pursue a unifying storyline (McAdams, 1993, 2013) or if they should instead honour the multiplicity of their experiences (Raggat, 2006). This raises questions about the relevance of adopting a certain metaphor at a particular time in life and for a specific life sphere. As such, considering the career as a game may foster adaptive strategies in certain circumstances, but not in others.

Research implications

The potential benefits of applying the SuperBetter metaphor to career transitions have been conceptually presented in this paper and need to be empirically tested. This is all the more necessary considering that the transposition of positive psychology concepts in career counselling remains largely empirically untested (Robertson, 2018). A pre–post design could be utilised to measure clients' perceived well-being and employability as a function of a game metaphor based intervention, and long-term impact could also be assessed. In addition, the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije University (MIPVU; Steen et al., 2010) and the Innovative Moments Coding System (IMCS; Gonçalves et al., 2011) might be used for a more in-depth analysis of the intervention

Practical implications

In this article we have demonstrated that the game metaphor provides an alternative vocabulary that career clients may experience as empowering and fun to work with. Career counsellors can use this metaphor in individual sessions and in group-based workshops, which could increase the accessibility of narrative interventions (e.g. Zikic & Hall, 2009). However, in either case, the metaphor must be offered as a reframing strategy once a climate of trust has been created, so as not to give the impression to clients that their current struggles are trivial. Therefore, Rogers (1957) fundamental attitudes of empathic understanding, congruence and unconditional positive regard are essential, as is the appropriate use of active listening skills.

Conclusion

In this article, our intention has been to highlight how considering one's career life from the perspective of a game can shift clients' conceptions regarding career transitions by providing them with a new outlook on their resources and constraints which could foster their well-being, proactive behaviours and coping strategies. More specifically, each tenet of SuperBetter's rules is likely to uniquely contribute to numerous aspects of a successful career development. Therefore, the game metaphor offers promising ventures for both career practice and research. However, the relevance of this metaphor may vary according to the client characteristics, including their fondness for all forms of play. Moreover, a single metaphor may narrow, as well as broaden perspectives, which highlights the need to encourage career clients to diversify how they conceptualise their current situation.

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