

Is self-reflection dangerous? Preventing rumination in career learning

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Abstract

Reflection is considered necessary and beneficial within career learning and is deemed to be a condition for successful career-identity development. Indeed, reflection is generally seen as a key competency in learning how to respond effectively to a complex and dynamic post-modern world in which individuals are increasingly exposed to risk. Paradoxically however, reflection can itself form a risk when it results in rumination. It is therefore important to identify the conditions and personal (risk) factors that make reflection a detrimental or beneficial activity and to identify elements within career-learning interventions that promote benefit. The purpose here is to increase awareness about reflective versus ruminative processes and promote responsible use of interventions that aim to stimulate reflection in the process of career-identity formation. Based on the “career writing” method, the authors conclude that a successful career intervention must especially provide good facilitation and a safe holding environment.

Keywords

Career reflection, rumination, narrative, career identity, career writing

Introduction

The need for career reflection is more paramount in today's society than ever before and the onus is increasingly on the individual to do the reflecting. While previous forms of career assessment were focused on matching models, such methods are no longer enough (Meijers & Lengelle, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009). Researchers and career professionals are aware that being able to reflect on the self is essential in today's market and that methods must be developed and assessed that make this possible and effective. However, research in several sub-domains of psychology indicates that an emphasis on reflecting can put people at risk of rumination with its associated symptoms (e.g. worry, anxiety, depression). These findings have barely been touched upon in the field of career development. Our aim is to offer an overview of the scientific literature on reflection and

rumination to career scientists and practitioners. We intend to uncover known conditions that make reflection either dangerous or beneficial. Finally, we will apply the findings by describing how career writing (Lengelle, 2014) is used to promote healthy reflection.

We will begin by describing changes in society in the last century, thereby showing the reasons reflection has become essential, but also explore the risks that would make it a form of unhealthy reflection (i.e. rumination). The aim here is also to encourage further research on the topic.

Societal developments underlying the need for career reflection

Until about halfway through the 20th-century, individuals had little influence over their life course as this was largely determined by the existing and assumed norms and values of the times (Meijers & Wesselingh,

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1999). There were so-called “standard biographies” whereby the identity of individuals (i.e. the story individuals tell themselves and others about the meaning of their lives) (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) was constructed on the basis of socially prescribed “master narratives” (Davies & Harré, 1990). However, due to secularization, the lifting of socio-political barriers, growing prosperity and mobility and the resulting increase in possible choices in the second half of the 20th-century, the “prescriptive power” of these narratives became increasingly contested, especially by young people, resulting in a growing individualization of society (Giddens, 1991). These changes in combination with the economic recession, which hit industrialized societies in the 1980s, meant that the individualized society soon became a risk society (Beck, 1992). In order to survive socially and economically, the individual was forced to demonstrate more and more self-direction (e.g. agency) based on a coherent career story (McMahon & Watson, 2015; Maree & Di Fabio, 2015). And because one’s story could (and can) no longer be derived from the wisdom of established narratives, an individual must select, synthesize, and ultimately construct one’s story from a much wider range of prescribed and imagined stories, where one’s own experiences also become part of the tale. With this in mind, education and career counseling are increasingly focused on the need for reflection in the hopes that it will foster narrative development and self-direction.

Indeed, this is the starting point of constructivist career theories, which make individuals responsible for their own life design (Savickas et al., 2009). At the core of constructivist theories is the idea that a “resilient career” can only be realized when individuals get to know themselves, more specifically identify life themes, which provide unity in a person’s life story (Savickas, 2011). Life themes are subconscious patterns in lives and life stories that usually have their roots in earlier life experiences (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979) and have become a form of tacit knowledge that has to be “voiced” in a dialogue in which stories about meaning are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Their construction and articulation form the foundation of co-constructing the next scene in the life plot (Savickas, 2011). The process frequently begins with a significant or painful experience in the present (e.g. job security is threatened; burnout; noticing inequity in the workplace) that brings up an old coping mechanism that is rooted in past struggles (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). These moments of life change and the resulting stress affect the development of brain, mind, and body awareness, all of which are closely connected (Siegel & Solomon, 2003). The situation can only be usefully understood when the messages from the emotional brain (where the experiences are stored) are given voice in the rational brain (Robertson, 2012). This in essence means that a successful identity-learning

process starts with a bodily awareness of emotions (Gendlin, 1996) and develops into a more cognitive understanding, which ultimately must meet with a sense of affective congruence. Law (1996) calls the first step the “sensing phase” of the learning process and this phase is followed by the sifting, focusing, and understanding phases.

The process, whereby the experience is voiced through the stages, does not happen automatically however. Stressful experiences tend to deactivate the ability to be rational for brief or longer periods (Van der Kolk, 2014). Even if rationality is reengaged—by for instance putting feelings aside—the thoughts that emerge are frequently rationalizations and become unhelpful default narratives. Humans are apt to reach for ways of avoiding what might require them to learn or change rather than touch on what is unprocessed. They do this by displaying the symptoms described by Baker and Staught (2003) in the acronym “*VERB*”—victimization, entitlement, rescue, and blame. This form of rationalization is, as Rand (1984, p. 12) puts it, a “process of not perceiving reality, but of attempting to make reality fit one’s emotions”. No matter how much insight and understanding an individual develops, “the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality” (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 47) and it tries to explain away what has happened with unhelpful consequences.

Getting to know one’s life theme through self-reflection can in fact be exhausting and meets with resistance; it arouses feelings of fear, helplessness, and anger. This is even truer in the context of “liquid modernity” where individuals are constantly being asked to reflect about their self, while at the same time being faced with increasing insecurity and alienation. Stress seems unavoidable, exhaustion is a risk and in the long-term the chance of existential anxiety and depression is real (Bauman, 2012).

In short, a person in the post-modern world runs the risk of collapsing under the pressure of having to constantly be a creative and critical subject in one’s own life. Under particular circumstances, self-reflection can therefore become rumination (Elliott & Coker, 2008; Takano & Tanno, 2009) which is the opposite of what is needed. In the section below, we will identify rumination risk factors and answer the question: what key elements need to be present in narrative career-learning interventions in order to promote self-reflection in a way that prepares people well for the risk society, without causing harm?

Empirical findings on reflection, rumination, and well-being

We define reflection as an active and intentional process of becoming conscious of and understanding experiences in order to learn from them for the future. Rumination by contrast is when reflection is

characterized by negative effects like becoming blocked from taking action, loss of spontaneity, pessimism, and falling into a bottomless pit of reflection upon reflection (Van Woerkom, 2010). Kukla (2007) describes it as falling into mental traps like continued thinking about a question that simply cannot be answered by a lack of data. Because thinking is an uncontrolled, associative process that stems from our unconscious psycho-somatic processes that evades introspection, we “often walk blindly against the intangible but nonetheless unyielding walls of language”, Steiner (2009, p. 52) concludes. In line with this argument, Dohn (2011) states that engaging in reflective activities can lead to rumination in the process of establishing independent secondary reflection practices with their own evaluative criteria thus “initiating a self-referential development of practice representations increasingly out of touch with practice” (p. 673). In addition, she mentions self-delusion and excessive pre-occupation with oneself (i.e. navel-gazing) as a risk.

In many studies, the expected positive effects of reflection are not found (Cornford, 2002; Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009; Meijers, Kuijpers, & Gundy, 2013). According to Şimşek (2012), the absence of evidence of positive effects of (self) reflection could be explained by the fact that “self-reflectors are at the same time self-ruminators” (p. 33). Indeed, several scholars view rumination as a likely side effect of reflection (André, 2009; Takano & Tanno, 2009; Van Seggelen-Damen & Van Dam, 2016). Both reflection and rumination can be viewed as forms of repetitive thought, “the process of thinking attentively, repetitively or frequently about one’s self and one’s world” (Segerstrom et al. in Watkins, 2008, p. 163). In fact the definitions of reflection and rumination overlap considerably and as a result the phenomena studied are difficult to disentangle.

Self-reflection and rumination are related

Rumination may be paradoxically defined as “a process in which people focus repeatedly on the causes and symptoms of their mood to improve the way they feel” (Kross, Duckworth, Ayduk, Tsukayama, & Mischel, 2011, p. 1033). Distinguishing it from worrying, Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, and Lyubomirsky (2008, p. 400) show rumination to have the following characteristics:

- more past-/present than future oriented;
- focused on issues of self-worth, meaning, themes of loss;
- conscious motive is to understand the deep meanings of events, gain insight, and solve problems;
- non-conscious motive is to avoid aversive situations and the responsibility of taking action.

Because the concepts reflection and rumination are closely related, it is no surprise that often

relationships are found between reflection, rumination, and being unwell or even depressed. That said, researchers have developed several instruments to disentangle the relationships. Elliot and Coker (2008) constructed two more or less independent ($r = .31$) scales: the Self-Reflection Scale and the Self-Rumination Scale. They found significant relationships between the two concepts and a measure for happiness. They conclude, “that although meaningful self-reflection may be beneficial (...) the perils of self-reflection are that it may trigger self-rumination which has detrimental consequences for happiness.” (p. 127). The reason for this they suggest is “that people who have a tendency to self-reflect find it difficult to disengage from this process in the face of adverse circumstances, unfavourable outcomes, and negative events in their lives” (p. 132).

The Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ) developed by Trapnell and Campbell (1999) produces scores for reflection and rumination that are reliable ($\alpha \geq .90$) and relatively independent ($r = .22$). Using this instrument Takano and Tanno (2009) found that self-reflection significantly predicted self-rumination, whereas self-rumination did not predict self-reflection. They conclude that self-reflection per se has an adaptive effect, but that this is cancelled out by the maladaptive effect of self-rumination. Those who reflect are likely to ruminate and to reflect simultaneously. “Self-reflection may easily turn into self-rumination, when individuals attempting to understand their current problems fail to generate solutions during their problem-solving attempts” (p. 263). Using the RRQ Şimşek (2012) showed that self-reflection and depression were correlated negatively but there are strong correlations between self-reflection and self-rumination, and self-rumination and depression. Using the same instrument, Van Seggelen-Damen and Van Dam (2016) hypothesized that reflection would have a negative relationship to emotional exhaustion, and a positive relationship to job satisfaction, but these hypotheses were not confirmed. They found, however, a strong, unidirectional relationship between reflection and rumination, and significant relationships between rumination and emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. They suggest that reflection raises questions and doubts that remain with the individual and are difficult to abandon. “Consequently, while trying to understand themselves and solve their problems, some employees might end up struggling with the issues raised and thus engage in rumination.” (p. 16).

Overall the studies done over diverse populations and cultures show that reflection in itself leads to positive outcomes on well-being, but that positive outcomes are often “spoiled” by negative effects caused by rumination. What then determines or influences whether repetitive thinking becomes reflection with the corresponding positive outcomes or rumination with negative outcomes?

Personality-related factors that influence the process and outcomes of thinking

Trapnell and Campbell (1999) searched for correlates of reflection and rumination with self-ratings of personality traits and measures of the five-factor model of personality. They conclude that the motivational dichotomy “fear vs. curiosity” is an important factor. Rumination seems motivated by perceived threats, losses, or injustices to the self. Reflection is motivated by curiosity or epistemic interest in the self. Rumination is associated with the Neuroticism factor and reflection is associated with the Openness factor. The findings of Trapnell and Campbell corroborate with those of Silvia, Eichstaedt, and Phillips (2005). Elliot and Coker (2008) found in their study that “independent self-construal” (i.e. to see yourself as independent from others) is associated with greater happiness. In addition, they found that self-reflection tends to be beneficial to individuals who do not exhibit high levels of happiness. To people who are extremely happy, self-reflection seems to not be beneficial. Takano, Sakamoto, and Tanno (2011) found that rumination is also associated with perceived impaired interpersonal skills. They propose that this could delay problem solving and exacerbate the effect of interpersonal problems, thereby leading to dysphoria. Şimşek (2012) tested a model in which three other variables were associated with depression, apart from self-reflection and self-rumination. Firstly, “self-concept clarity” (SCC), i.e. a clear and consistent organization of multiple facets of the self. Secondly, the “Gap” (GAP) between experience and language, i.e. the perceived inability to express inner experiences using language. And finally, Şimşek introduced the “Need for absolute truth” (NAT), i.e. a strong desire for an abstract type of self-knowledge and self-relevant information as a rigid and inflexible determinant of the self. Şimşek found a positive relation between GAP, SCC, and depression. This corroborates the findings of Csank and Conway (2004) that high SCC may reflect poor adjustment, i.e. defensiveness, perfectionism, and a risk factor for depression when people face achievement stressors. Furthermore NAT was an important mediator for the relationship between reflection and depression: self-reflection seems harmful to mental health when a person has a high need for “absolute truth”.

Van Seggelen-Damen and Van Dam (2016) incorporated in their study the role of self-efficacy, defined as “the extent to which people believe they can perform the behavior required in any given situation to obtain certain goals” (p. 3). Their findings confirmed the importance of self-efficacy for employee well-being. Employees who were more self-efficacious tend to engage more in self-reflection and less in self-rumination.

Gender is another important factor: women are more at risk for depression than men because they ruminate more (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). A study by Sales,

Merrill, and Fivush (2013) among adolescent females with challenging lives showed that greater narrative meaning making (measured by the inclusion of more cognitive processing words, positive emotion, and greater reflective insight) about a highly negative event was associated with higher depressive symptoms. Having a more external locus of control was also significantly related to having higher levels of depressive symptoms. The authors speculate that in the absence of a structured, scaffolded model of narrative meaning making, it was too difficult for the interviewed young women to create narratives that provide beneficial effects.

Based on an extensive review of literature on meaning-making, Park (2010) concludes that meaning-making efforts do not automatically lead to gaining a sense of meaning. “The quality of the meaning-making attempts and the meanings made is at least as important as the quantity”, Park (2010, p. 290) states. For example, blame and negative evaluations typically lead to poorer outcomes than nonjudgmental reflection. Kross et al. (2011) conducted an experiment with fifth-grade children to help delineate the psychological mechanisms that distinguish adaptive versus maladaptive forms of self-reflection. They studied the perspective of the children recalling negative experiences. A “self-immersed” perspective means that they visualize events happening to them through their own eyes. From a “self-distanced” perspective they see themselves in their experience from the perspective of an observer or “fly on the wall”. The findings of Kross et al. indicate that children who analyze their feelings from a self-distanced perspective recount less and reconstruct more. A self-immersed perspective leads to more emotional reactivity and blaming others. In an earlier study, Kross (2009) cites fMRI brain research indicating that recalling negative experiences from a self-immersed perspective activates more strongly Brodmann Area 25, an area involved in depression, than recalling them from a self-distanced perspective.

Papageorgiou and Wells (2003), Roussis and Wells (2008), and Smith and Alloy (2009) conclude that rumination serves to effectively avoid the processing of negative emotions. “High ruminators may avoid the private experience of negative affect through rumination and in so doing, may actually worsen their negative mood (...) rumination is a misguided emotion regulation strategy”, according to Smith and Alloy (2009, p. 123). In the same vein, Geurtz (2013) treats thinking as a widespread addiction, comparable to addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and sex: “The effect is a temporary interruption of discomfort but also a strengthening of it after the effect of the drug has passed” (p. 10). According to Watkins (2008), repetitive thought becomes unconstructive when a person experiences an inability to reduce cognitive or emotional discrepancy and at the same time is unable to give up the efforts. Watkins also states

that repetitive thought that is characterized by high-level, more abstract construals has unconstructive consequences under circumstances of novelty, unfamiliarity, difficulty, or stress. This is because these construals do not guide the individual in knowing what to do next. Moreover, processing at a higher, more abstract level may interfere with goal disengagement. The higher in the hierarchy, the more important the goal becomes to the general sense of self, and the harder it becomes to disengage from it. In the same vein, Rood (2011) concludes her dissertation stating that altering thinking styles (from abstract to concrete) may be more helpful for prevention and treatment of juvenile depression than other interventions.

Akin to global traits and abstract construals is the concept over-general or categoric memory (Watkins & Teasdale, 2001). Over-general memories are summaries of repeated occasions (for instance waiting at bus stops or making mistakes) and are contrasted to specific memories (i.e. events that occurred at a particular place and time). Over-general memory has been implicated in the maintenance of depression. In an experimental study, Watkins and Teasdale (2001) found that an analytical self-focus is associated with over-general memory and with chronic ruminative attempts to make sense of current or past difficulties. Self-focus in itself is not a negative factor according to a meta-analysis of 226 studies on self-focus and negative affect by Mor and Winquist (in Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The researchers concluded that self-focus after failure was associated with increased negative affect but that self-focus after positive events was associated with reduced negative affect.

Two additional factors in the causes of rumination became clear from a questionnaire study among psychology students where Stein and Grant (2014) investigated the role of dysfunctional attitudes (“negatively biased assumptions and beliefs regarding oneself, the world, and the future”) and core self-evaluations (“a basic, fundamental appraisal of one’s worthiness, effectiveness, and capability as a person”) in the relations between self-reflection, self-insight, and subjective well-being. Their findings suggest “that self-reflection can lead to enhanced well-being through the development of self-insight and this is more likely to occur when low levels of dysfunctional attitudes and higher levels of positive self-evaluations are present” (p. 519). In other words, if a person already has negative attitudes about the self, rumination is more likely, while those who think well of themselves are likely to benefit from reflection.

Reflection and rumination: Summing-up

Figure 1 depicts the factors that were found in our literature search, and their influence. Essentially, if a person is psychologically healthy, confident, open, in control, not expecting too much of reflection, and not too focused on him- or herself, then productive forms

of reflection are likely to occur. In other cases, there is a risk of rumination and negative outcomes.

Almost all factors that were discussed are in the domain of characteristics or traits of the person, habitual ways of thinking, and of perceptions and attitudes. The next section examines—using the example of the narrative career-learning intervention “career writing”—which responses and key elements can counter the detrimental effects of rumination and make the work of career-identity formation a beneficial reflective activity.

Career writing

Career writing (Lengelle, 2014) is a narrative-based career identity development method suitable for fostering life designing that is based on both writing for personal development (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006) and on career counseling. It combines creative writing (e.g. fictionalizing aspects of one’s biography), expressive writing (i.e. exploring traumatic experiences by writing about both the events and feelings experienced), and reflective writing (i.e. deliberate reflections about one’s life with an opportunity to question beliefs and identifications). Research on the method (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2014) shows a variety of positive outcomes (e.g. luck readiness, workplace performance, action-ability, positive emotions) among university students. Additionally, two decades of experience by one of the authors using writing as a method for personal and professional development has shown few ruminative side effects. Furthermore, writing for the aim of self-exploration and healing has been shown to be effective: research done in the last three decades has demonstrated significant positive benefits to both physical and mental health (Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker, 2011). What then makes writing about one’s life and personal struggle an effective form of self-reflection and what might that say about career-learning interventions in a more general sense?

First and foremost, the online or face-to-face classroom where “career writing” is taught is a non-judgmental space (Lengelle & Ashby, 2016). Second, the approach is a structured narrative meaning-making method that consciously takes into consideration that reflective learning is an embodied experience in which emotions and thoughts play a combined role in personal development. It also recognizes the importance of getting “out of one’s head” (e.g. out of overly self-involved, repetitive thinking processes) and does so using a host of creative exercises that foster self-insight (Lengelle, 2014).

There are several main exercises used in career writing. First “proprioceptive writing”, a journal-writing method that invites people to write what they *hear* while also observing what appears on the page and asking probing questions (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002). Second, fiction writing where students make up characters and stories without the pressure of telling or

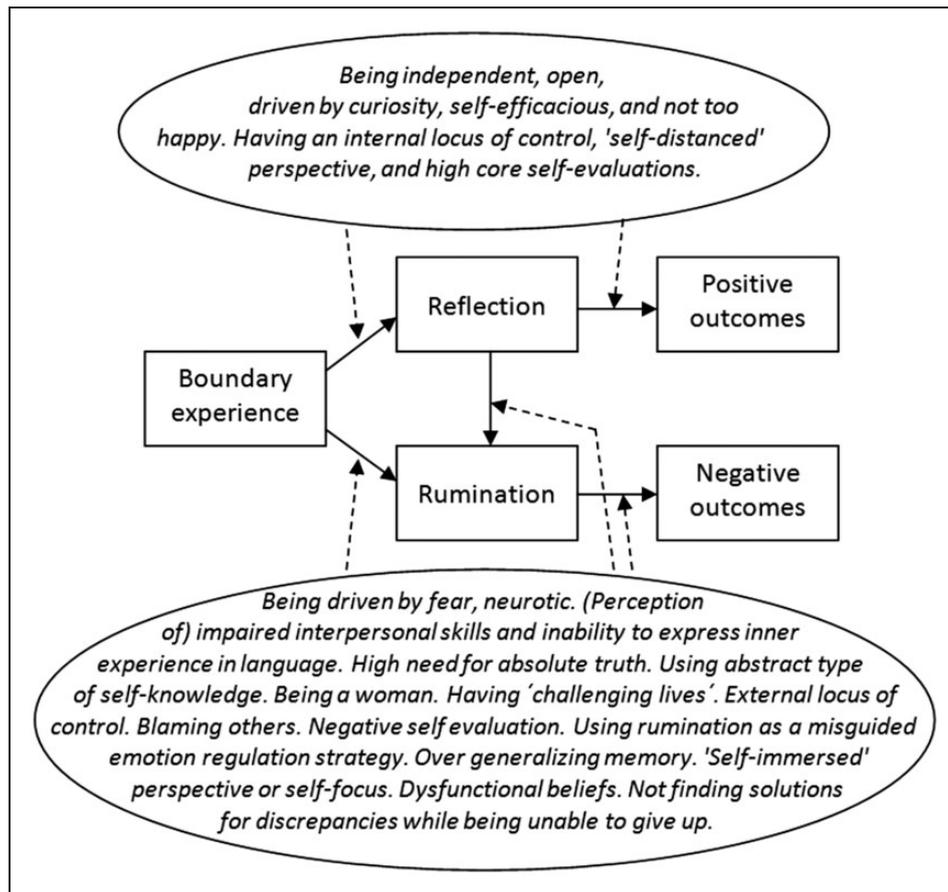


Figure 1. Factors influencing processes and outcomes of thinking about stressful experiences.

Table 1. Response of career writing to risk factors of rumination.

Risk factor	Career writing view, exercise or interaction
Fear dominates curiosity	The creative process of career writing emphasizes a process of exploration; the facilitator welcomes “fear” as a symptom of wanting to develop; the presence of other group members demonstrating their own “curiosity” frequently rubs off on more fearful types. There are a variety of exercises, like proprioceptive writing and The Work that can be used to look at the “monster under the bed”.
Neuroticism—a personality trait related to anxiety, fear, moodiness, worry and other negative emotional states	The expressions of neuroticism are considered normal “symptoms” when reacting to boundary experiences. Proprioceptive writing makes room for feelings and worries (so-called negative feelings) in the sensing phase in particular. If complaints persist, dialogue writing and “The Work” are good exercises for questioning underlying beliefs that may exacerbate suffering and symptoms.
(Perceptions of) Impaired interpersonal skills	Writing itself is often suited to shy introverted or socially awkward people because they have an option to share or not or can wait until they are more comfortable; others sharing in the group often reveal common vulnerabilities and this conceivably lowers the anxiety that is associated with (perceived) impaired interpersonal skills. Just as in counselling, being “weird” or perceiving oneself as such is not a barrier to participation.

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Risk factor	Career writing view, exercise or interaction
Inability to express inner experience in language	The aim of career writing is precisely to foster the expression in language of what is experienced inside. Writing in a variety of different ways, using different exercises, and doing so at your own pace is a way to enhance competence with language. The principle of practice is part of the remedy here: the mere practice of writing, however slowly and awkwardly it may begin, constitutes practice. In people unable to identify feelings (e.g. alexithymia) writing in specific details about actual events can begin to connect “inner experience” with language.
Need for absolute truth	The exercise “The Work” is likely the most powerful undoing with regards to a need or compulsion for viewing oneself or situations in a way that requires “absolute truth”. This exercise can also reveal the humor in having this desire; such humor lightens the seriousness and shows the relativity of “truth”.
Abstract type of self-knowledge	Career writing emphasizes the value of writing about one’s own lived experience in concrete detail and not having to formulate a “theory” about one’s own failings or triumphs. If “abstract” or a more conceptual knowledge is gained as a result, the process ties that to felt-experience.
Being a woman	Interestingly, career writing attracts women in relatively high numbers. Regardless of whether a man who tends to ruminate a lot or women who ruminate more often are involved with the process, the reflection done here is aimed at “taking one’s self” out of repetitive cycles of thought (see other risk factors for details)
Having (had) a challenging life	As mentioned in the body of the article above, those with “challenging lives” were likely unable to make positive meaning making because of a lack of “a scaffolded model of meaning making”. Career writing offers a scaffolded form working with a clear structure that takes into consideration both traumatic experience, the non-verbal automatic responses stored, the need for translation of those feelings into language and the nature of the embodied learning needed through the phases (e.g. sensing).
External locus of control	Writing in this context is geared towards stimulating an “internal dialogue” so that steps taken as a result of a second story are “felt” to be congruent and life giving and coming from one’s self (not others’ views, advice, or pressure). Cultivating an “internal dialogue” counters overly externalized points of focus—said in writing terms: one’s writing voice is a form of speaking one’s own truth in the face of opposing viewpoints.
Blaming	The Work is a good exercise to counter ongoing blaming, however “blaming” itself is considered a natural symptom of a first story within “career writing” (it’s no big deal, just one’s first response to a boundary experience). By explaining the theory of career learning to participants in a way that provides information about the learning process on a “just enough and just in time” basis, these symptoms can be seen with some humor and soberness and as part of a larger process, not a destination.
Negative self-evaluation	This too is considered a natural symptom of a boundary experience—a kneejerk reaction to a challenge a person has not yet learned how to meet. A non-judgmental atmosphere in the course and a variety of exercises that question such perspectives or create an opportunity for competence gained in writing can lessen this tendency. The fun of creating fiction or poetry and sharing this within a class setting (where feedback is not evaluative or corrective) can also go a long way in reducing negative self-evaluation

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Risk factor	Career writing view, exercise or interaction
Using misguided strategies to avoid negative emotion	The process described welcomes negative emotions, in fact explaining the role they play in identifying salient themes. Participants are encouraged to write in concrete details about struggles (e.g. being fired from a job), such detail brings up feelings readily, including negative ones.
Over generalizing memory	Writing about specific occurrences and not grouping them together in a kind of over-arching conclusion is intended to lessen this tendency; The Work also helps to question conclusions individuals have drawn about the past
Self-focus	Putting worries and thoughts on the page so they can be observed "like a fly on the wall" instead of these remaining internalized; creative dialogue writing exercise where you write with yourself and an imagined "wiser" self or with an imagined other; reading in class means others also observe your process which helps you see yourself from the outside in
Dysfunctional beliefs	The exercise "The Work" is used to query existing beliefs about self and others
Pre-occupation with self/self-immersed perspective	See "Self-referential" and "Self delusional" for similar responses
No solutions appearing (after reflection)	The focus on "solutions" is often a premature attempt towards a new perspective. The writing process allows first for examining the rightness of the questions and interpretations of the boundary experience; solutions appear organically as a result of a process that combines feelings and words and checks them again against feelings. The type of reflection here is not (only) "head work" but embodied work. The emphasis in the process here is on being better able to respond which supports solutions forming over time—solutions are the fruits of one's labor, as opposed to goals that should be readily achieved.
Emotional and cognitive discrepancies	The career-writing process is geared towards bringing what is felt and what is thought together in ways that is congruent and life giving. It gives an individual the opportunity to develop a new perspective through sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding where emotions are put into words that are checked again for emotional congruence. All exercises have this integrative mix.

withholding personal "truths" and later go back to identify salient emotions and uncover life themes that have inadvertently appeared on the page. There is also play-writing or dialogue writing where participants can playfully explore a variety of voices, also ones that have been pushed into the margins. This type of writing also allows for invoking so-called "outside voices". Poetry is also used, in various phases of the process, sometimes to express raw emotions, other times to summarize key insights or to capture a life theme so that it can become a useful point of reflection during future action steps. "The Work" is an inquiry-based writing exercise that helps individuals question stressful beliefs about others and themselves (Katie, 2002). While students often begin by writing about stressful life events with a tone of certainty or victimhood they learn that their views are relative, subject to revision, frequently unhelpful, and even humorous in their absurdity or arrogance.

Table 1 shows an overview of a number of the risk factors identified above and a response to each in concrete terms using career writing as a reference point.

A summary of key insights

A career narrative method that would foster reflection in order to make life designing possible requires a safe holding space that is facilitated by a compassionate and knowledgeable teacher or guide. A successful method will promote the following developmental processes: (1) engaging with (i.e. having/allowing/articulating) as well as observing feelings; (2) cultivating a mutually inspiring internal as well as an external dialogue (a conversation with one's self and others); (3) articulating lived experiences while also questioning existing beliefs about those experiences (using specific and concrete details to construct stories and using questions to deconstruct our responses to experience); (4) understanding the theory of the growth process involved in identity formation, which includes identifying pitfalls and responding with do-able steps (theory is provided on a just-enough, just-in-time basis); (5) stimulating a playful, creative process that fosters a sense of fun and competence.

A group-work format has additional benefits because it allows for the development of a wider range of possible perspectives, has individuals see and experience that they are “not alone” with their struggles and provides opportunities to witness one’s own growing competence through the eyes of others.

Conclusion

It is likely that the emphasis on reflection within schools, universities, and in organizations will grow further as the complexity, insecurity, and individualization of society increases. It is therefore important that individuals get the opportunity to develop a reflective practice that is both effective and prevents the harmful effects of rumination. We have described a method that engages one’s creativity, expressivity and reflectivity to explore this process. In her perhaps paradoxical view of reflection, Gilbert describes the books she has written as “souvenirs of journeys that I took, in which I managed (blessedly) to escape myself for a little while” (Gilbert, 2015, p. 172). This may be in part at the heart of good narrative approaches: we get to develop ourselves while being relieved “temporarily from the dreadful burden of being who we are” (ibid., p. 172). In other words, we get to reflect without the self-focus and neurotic dimensions of rumination. In fictionalizing our lives, poetically capturing moments of experience, and questioning our stressful stories, new perspectives and identities take shape. Our old selves are left behind in the form of our old stories about who we were and our second stories become our second chances.

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