Applying Visual Metaphors to Career Transitions

Robert William Barner

Journal of Career Development 2011 38: 89 originally published online 17 May 2010
DOI: 10.1177/0894845309359287

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jcd.sagepub.com/content/38/1/89

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

University of Missouri-Columbia

Additional services and information for Journal of Career Development can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jcd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://jcd.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://jcd.sagepub.com/content/38/1/89.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Mar 7, 2011
OnlineFirst Version of Record - May 17, 2010

What is This?
Applying Visual Metaphors to Career Transitions

Robert William Barner

Abstract
This article makes use of a case study involving two career professionals to show how visual metaphors can be used as an important part of a constructivist approach to career counseling. It discusses how visual metaphors can serve as an effective methodology for encouraging adults to engage in the self-review of career transitions, discusses comparative approaches to the use of visual metaphors, and explores potential applications of this methodology to career counseling.

Keywords
career assessment, career exploration/preparation, career constructive approaches/postmodern approaches, qualitative methods

Several researchers (Amundson, 2005; Brott, 2005; Peavy, 1997) have emphasized the emerging role that constructivist approaches are coming to play in career counseling. As these approaches continue to gain support, counselors are searching for qualitative assessment techniques that can encourage individuals to give voice to their career hopes, concerns, and future goals by taking an active role in the exploration and coconstruction of their life stories. Constructivist techniques that have been used to facilitate career assessment include the life space map (Peavy, 1997), lifeline (Goldman, 1990), genogram (McMahon &

1 Department of Dispute Resolution and Counseling, Southern Methodist University, Plano, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Robert William Barner, Department of Dispute Resolution and Counseling, Southern Methodist University, 5901 Fairmount Drive, Plano, TX 75093, USA.
Email: ibscribe@earthlink.net
Patton, 2002), and card sort (Parker, 2006). A thorough review of several constructivist assessment techniques can be found in Brott’s (2004, 2005) articles on the subject. The following article uses two cases to introduce an additional constructivist assessment tool, the visual metaphor technique, and explains how this tool can be used to help clients engage in meaningful self-analysis when faced with significant career transitions.

The Constructivist Approach to Career Counseling

Throughout this article, the term “constructivism” is used to emphasize a view of knowledge and learning that places emphasis on the unique way in which individuals cognitively construct meaning within their lives. In this sense, constructivism can be contrasted with social constructionism, which emphasizes the way in which knowledge and learning are socially and culturally constructed and embedded through the use of discourse and language. Although an extended explanation of the differences between constructivism and social constructionism lies beyond the scope of this article, the reader is encouraged to review the article by Young and Collin (2004) on this subject as a means of understanding the subtle differences that distinguish these different epistemological perspectives.

As viewed through the lens of constructivism, the concept of career takes the form of a “self-conceiving and self-organizing system” (Amundson, 2005, p. 92). The constructivist approach places emphasis on how individuals construct meaning and purpose within their careers (Peavy, 1997). Grier-Reed, Skaar, and Conkel-Ziebell (2009) suggest that all constructivist career theories share certain commonalities:

Constructivist career theories tend to be grounded in narrative (authoring or telling of one’s story), action (exploring aspects of one’s self, such as culture, values and beliefs), construction (constructing one’s own identity within a social context), and interpretation (integrating personal identity and meaning to inform career development). (p. 291)

The constructivist approach has important implications for career diagnosis and assessment, in that within the constructivist paradigm, the goal of assessment ceases to be the selection of an ideal “fit” between an individual and a set of limited and clearly demarcated career choices. Instead, the career seeker is viewed as engaging in the ongoing construction of a meaningful life/work framework, one that is continually forged against a backdrop of changing personal identity and economic and organizational uncertainty (Hoskins, 1995; Peavy, 1998; Severy, 2008). Within the constructivist perspective, individuals are viewed as taking the first step in successfully navigating career transitions when they construct meaningful interpretive frameworks for fully integrating their views of past history, present circumstances, and future needs (Amundson, 2005; Maree, Ebersohn & Molepo, 2006). In the same way, adopting the constructivist perspective means that career counselors shift their role from that of expert problem solver to collaborative partner. As a collaborative partner,
counselors listen carefully to clients’ life stories to “notice how stories are constructed, note the limits, and facilitate the exploration of other stories” (Brott, 2001, p. 49).

The Role of Metaphors in Career Assessment

Metaphors can serve as an important interpretive vehicle in helping individuals construct and make sense of their own career narratives. Peavy (1998) contends that “our lives are lived out metaphorically and mythically. Deprive people of their stories and you leave them paralyzed in their actions and stuttering in their words” (p. 31). Metaphors, which have been defined as “the understanding of one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5), possess several qualities that make them potent conveyers of personal and organizational experience. They are compact, enabling a single word, phrase, visual symbol, or object to convey a broad array of interrelated thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Ortony, 1993). Because metaphors are incomplete, in that they merely suggest or imply rather than attempt to explain in a literal sense (Ortony, 1975), they “leave room for the imagination to fill in details” (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 99). This incompleteness also draws our attention to those dominant features that are commonly associated with a given metaphor. Thus, the individual who describes herself as “caught in an ever-tightening vise” may begin to view her career through this metaphorical lens, eliminating from view other interpretative frameworks.

Within the counseling process, these unique characteristics allow metaphors to serve as powerful symbolic vehicles for giving voice to clients’ life experiences (Amundson, 2005; Hoskins, 1995; Lyddon, Alison, & Sparks, 2001; Rule 1983). Through the use of metaphors, individuals may uncover tacit assumptions about self and world that subtly shape their views of life events and possible futures (Lenrow, 1966; Lyddon et al., 2001). Metaphors also appear to support counseling by facilitating the expression of emotional states and experiences that may otherwise difficult to convey (Carlsen, 1996; Fox, 1989; Lyddon et al., 2001; Siegelman, 1990). Similarly, McMahon (2006) contends that the use of metaphors in career counseling may serve as a vehicle to move “away from the conscious mind and prior meaning structures into uncharted territory where new meaning may be created” (p. 21).

Although the focus of most metaphor research has been on the use of verbal metaphors, individuals frequently make use of such nonverbal metaphors as drawings, icons, or artifacts to give voice to their personal experiences (Fox, 1989; Stein, 1994). Meyerson (1991) has proposed that visual data collection methods such as pictures or images provide several advantages over the use of more traditional diagnostic methods such as organizational interviews. These advantages include facilitating the ability of individuals to express emotionally charged issues and reducing the impact of social-desirability effects (Meyerson, 1991, pp. 263-266).

In summary, visual metaphors appear to constitute an important part of a client’s narratives and may provide a useful method for helping individuals integrate the
emotional and symbolic aspects of their life experiences and career aspirations. The current study attempts to extend this area of research by using two cases to illustrate how visual metaphors can be used to help individuals construct meaning from career transitions and to envision potential opportunities that exist within those transitions.

**Method**

**Study Participants**

This case study involved two graduate students, a 26-year-old Hispanic male and a 42-year-old White female, within Southern Methodist University’s Graduate Program in Dispute Resolution and Counseling. Both participants volunteered from a general invitation that was presented to 35 students within two graduate classes. Prior to the first session, all participants received a written overview explaining the study procedures and the requirements for participation.

**Career Counselor**

The counselor is a 57-year-old White male, whose background includes 25 years of experience in career counseling and coaching within international corporate environments, as well as 5 years of experience in providing career counseling to graduate students. During the past 15 years, the counselor has used a variety of visual metaphor techniques to support client interventions in the areas of career development, executive coaching, and team building, including collage construction and the drawing of visual metaphors (Barner, 2008). For the past 5 years, the counselor has applied the VE2™ deck, the tool used within the current study, and its predecessor, Visual Explorer™, to support self-reflection and assessment within both career counseling and executive coaching settings.

**Assessment Tool**

Within each session, the VE2™ deck was used to elicit visual metaphors related to participants’ career challenges and aspirations. VE2™ is a graphic tool developed by David Horth and Charles Palus of the Center for Creative Leadership to facilitate the use of visual metaphors. The VE2™ is a refinement of the Visual Explorer™ deck originally designed by the authors. VE2™ consists of two card-size packs totaling 110 images that encompass a wide array of abstract and concrete images. Of these images, 54 feature people, either individually or in groups. These images were originally chosen by the creators based on the criteria of obtaining images that represented a wide variety of visual styles (such as abstracts and photos), human conditions (such as gender and ethnicity), and “interesting” characteristics such as images that “hint at layers of meaning or hidden perspectives” (Palus & Drath, 2001, p. 32). The deck was chosen for this study because it has been applied in a
variety of applications related to metaphor elicitation at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Palus & Drath, 2001).

It should be noted that as a qualitative, projective technique, the VE2™ lacks data regarding reliability or validity. This is aligned with Richardson’s (1996) assertion that “qualitative research should not be evaluated in terms of the canons of validity that have evolved for the assessment of quantitative research, since these have different epistemological priorities and commitments” (pp. 191-192). In addition, although this tool has been used extensively within a variety of international team building and organizational change management settings (Palus & Drath, 2001), the current study is believed to be the first published account of the application of this technique to career counseling.

The VE2™ deck comes with a brief self-directed interpretive guide and an online forum (http://cclve.blogspot.com/2008/12/visual-explorer-session-step-by-step.html) where VE2™ researchers and practitioners can share reports of their work with this tool. In addition, the Coaching for Development program offered by the Center for Creative Leadership provides additional training in the use of this assessment tool.

**Interview Process**

Each student participated in a two-part, 90-min career counseling session, which was videotaped to facilitate their subsequent review and transcription by the counselor. Working within the perspective as “narrative as personal story,” these sessions were designed to elicit career narratives in the form of stories. During the first part of the session, participants were asked to focus on the past, by sharing their career stories to the present moment. At the beginning of each session, participants were given the following directions:

> In today’s session we are going to focus on your career history. One way of thinking about your career history is as a story that has been partially written, yet with much to be completed. With this in mind, could you tell me your story as you see it so far?

Approximately 10 min into their sessions, participants were directed to select a VE2™ card that could serve as a metaphor for how they viewed their careers from the past to the present. Participants were then asked to discuss those aspects of each image that were of particular importance to them, to tell the stories that were represented within those images, and finally to relate those stories back to their careers. Participants were then given a 5-min break, which served as a transition point for helping clients shift their focus of attention from the past and the present to their imagined futures. After the break, participants provided the following instructions regarding the second part of the career session:

> Our career stories remain unfinished for as long as we live. I am now going to ask you to think about how you would ideally like to see your career take shape over the
next three to five years. Please feel free to focus on any aspects of your career that are important to you.

Participants were then asked to select a VE2™ card that served as a metaphor for how they envisioned their career futures, to describe those aspects of the image that were important to them, and to explain how these images related to their envisioned career futures. As the last phase of the interview, participants were asked to place the cards that they had chosen next to each other and to discuss what they noticed in terms of differences or similarities between these cards. Toward the end of the session, participants were encouraged to discuss what they had discovered about themselves and their careers during the sessions.

**Process for Data Interpretation**

The use of the VE2™ is aligned with the constructivist assumption that the career counselor must eschew the roles of expert problem solving and assessment interpreter to recognize and respect the client’s voice and unique perspective in self-interpreting her career stories (Brott, 2004; Peavy, 1998; Schultheiss, 2005). The counselor attempted to adhere to this approach by encouraging the clients to elaborate on how they viewed their career metaphors as an integral part of their career stories and avoid superimposing the counselor’s interpretative framework on those metaphors. Throughout these counseling sessions, the counselor occasionally asked open-ended questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their stories. Representative questions were “Could you tell me more about the feelings that you experienced in that situation?” or “When you said ... could you describe that a bit more?” Such questions involve the use of “clean language” (Lawley & Tompkins, 2003, p. 28), which attempts to allow a narrative to unfold from the personal perspective and meaning structure of the client, rather than be externally imposed by the counselor. Lawley and Tompkins (2003) suggest that the use of clean language “minimizes the imposition of your ‘map’ (metaphors, assumptions, and perceptions) upon the client’s metaphorical landscape” (p. 28).

The use of videotaping and transcriptions helped ensure that participants’ narratives were accurately presented (Creswell, 2007). In addition, 1 week after the sessions, participants were given the opportunity to read through the excerpts of their transcribed stories and the counselor’s summary of their self-assessments. Participants’ reviews of their transcripts and the counselor’s summaries of their self-assessments served as important “member checks” (Patton, 2001, p. 560) to ensure that the summaries that were developed by the counselor reflected participants’ meaning perspectives. In addition, this reflective process is an important part of how clients construct meaning from their stories and metaphors. This idea is reflected in Loyttyniemi’s (2001) assertion that we do not take meaning from major life transitions as they are lived but rather as they are reviewed in retrospect through our stories. The following section shows representative findings for the two participants.
Results

Participant 1: Carlos

Carlos is a 26-year-old Hispanic male who has worked for several years in the areas of sports retail and customer service. He holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and is just finishing his program of graduate studies. Carlos indicated that he had initially entered his graduate program with the intent of working in a mediation setting involving labor-management relationships. However, as he progressed through the program, he found that he had become increasingly interested in working in the areas of group facilitation and leadership coaching. Carlos gave the following explanation of the card that he drew from the VE™ deck (Figure 1) to represent the story of his career history:

It’s a person standing up in a small boat looking out over a large body of water. He’s feeling a little bit unsure about how things are going to go, not knowing what he’s going to encounter as he sets out, but still knowing where you want to go is where you want to get to . . . . The horizon is a little clear, but with my experience with boats, there are going to be some things that you don’t see along the way. He is by himself . . . so it’s a little bit scary, because I know that I have to make this decision on my own and determine what’s important to me, rather
than how friends will react or what’s important to them . . . . The water is closer to an ocean
than a small pond because there is a lot of things to take in and learn. I mean, I know where
I am now but I’m still trying to find out where I’m going but how I going to get there.

The second image that Carlos selected (Figure 2) to represent his career future also
showed an individual in a boat but in a very different setting. In explaining this
image, Carlos said:

The image that I chose for a good future work environment was a picture of a couple of
people in a boat, all rowing together. I want to be in an environment in which people
help each other to work towards common goals. In rowing a boat everyone has to be in
sync and help each other out . . . somewhere where it’s a collaborative work environ-
ment. The people in the boat feel good about working together and have a sense of
camaraderie. I also see someone at the front of the boat, looking out for the rest of the
team. I think that’s something that I’d want as well, someone who’s been around an
organization and who knows where to go, and who can provide direction regarding
what needs to be done to succeed.

Carlos also extracted a third image (not shown here) of a cello soloist to represent
how he would like to envision himself at an even further point in his career. Carlos
provided the following interpretation of this image:

The lady is playing for an audience . . . She’s at a master’s level where she is consid-
ered great at what she does . . . . She loves the music and that’s why she does it, which is
what I want to be able to do with my work, to love what I do. Her instrument’s almost an extension of her body, and that’s what I want to be able to do . . . it comes to her very naturally . . . . The music is enjoyable to her and that’s what I want—to enjoy the work that I’m doing, so that at the end of the day I might be tired but I feel like I’ve accomplished something. And she gets satisfaction from the audience’s satisfaction, and that’s where I see myself in coaching, wanting to help people.

In comparing the three pictures, Carlos connected the images to provide the following interpretation of his career story:

In the first picture I have an idea of where I want to go but don’t know how to get there. In the second image we, as a team, know where we want to go and someone’s helping us along the way. Also, I notice that the first picture is a bit darker than the second, as if you don’t know where you’re going. The second picture is lighter; you can see where you’re headed. In the first picture there are ripples in the water, while in the second image the water is calm. The difference between the second and third picture is that early on I want to be able to do things for the team, but later on I want to be able to appreciate the ability to work by myself.

_Counselor’s summary of Carlos’ self-assessment._ Carlos described his career history from the perspective of the solitary adventurer who has set sail alone but who is unsure on how to reach his goals. During our discussion, Carlos explained that at this point in his career, he feels a bit uncertain as to what will be involved in making the transition from working in smaller retail settings to working in a larger, more sophisticated corporate environment. He added that that he has heard that corporate settings are often “cutthroat,” and that they expect employees to make significant accommodations, such as long work hours, that can adversely affect their life/work balance.

Carlos’s solution for how to navigate through such uncertainty is shown in the second image, which represents his view of himself in the near future. Once again, Carlos is on the water, but this time as part of a supportive team (a rowing crew), directed by an experienced mentor who can provide needed direction as he transitions into the corporate world. As Carlos projects forward several years, he sees himself once more alone, but this time now transformed into someone who is able to “play at the masters level.”

**Participant 2: Linda**

Linda is a 42-year-old White female with more than 25 years of experience in information technology. She currently holds an executive corporate position with her company. In setting the stage for our discussion, Linda explained that she was now approaching a major transition point in her career, as she begins to consider how to shift away from her long-term corporate track into a totally new career path.
As a metaphor for her career experience to date, Linda chose a photo (Figure 3) of a solitary mountain climber, for which she provided the following interpretation:

I see someone working hard in a difficult environment and climbing up the mountain. He’s in the middle of the climb and it’s fun and enjoyable (smiling as she makes motions with her hands of climbing a rope) and there is a lot of calmness in it, but then you get up there (hands freeze in mid-motion with clenched fists) ... and you get up there and ... the question is, “How do you get down, and when is it time to get down?” For me, “coming down” means being where the rest of the people are. I like being where the people are. There is all of the energy, the “umph,” to get there [up the mountain] and then you get here and ... I don’t want to be up there by myself.”

Linda selected three different images to serve as metaphors for her career future. The first two images (not presented here) show a group of penguins on a beach and a montage of smiling faces. The third (Figure 4) is a photo of a group of people performing on a boardwalk, each of whom is assuming a different yoga posture. Linda provided the following description of these images.

I picked these three because they all show groups. I like this group here (picks up card of yoga practitioners) because they’re doing their own thing, but doing it together. And
they are in harmony; not just with themselves or each other, but with the universe. That’s important—something bigger, than just getting up and getting a paycheck. I like this group here (card showing faces) because they are all looking directly at each other, a lot of unison and color. And they are happy. They are not there against their will but socializing, and close . . . feeling like everyone is communicating. And then these little guys (card showing penguins) are just having fun and going in the same direction. Life is not tough (taps card) but playful.

Later in our discussion, Linda noted that all three cards shared certain common themes. They depicted groups of people or animals who are simultaneously connected and aligned, yet who respect each other’s individuality. She felt that all three cards represented a connection with what she termed a “larger harmony” as represented by the beach (penguins image), the sunrise background (yoga practitioners image), and the colorful mosaic-like backdrop (faces image). Linda provided the following explanation to explain the relationship between the card that she had chosen to represent her career story up to the present and the three cards that represented the unfolding of that story into the future:

For several years I worked as a single mom, so I had to go into the corporate world and climb that mountain. And I did it very well. But now I want to be connected to this
group of people who stand for something; who believe in something that’s bigger than themselves. When I think of where I want to go I want to be in a completely different position. I want to branch out of corporate America and get into society. I don’t know if this is a non-profit, or teaching underprivileged kids, or going out on my own. Something that is real in the universe, Contributing to a larger goal, such as “every child deserves a good education” and me, myself, being a key part of that change.

Counselor’s summary of Linda’s self-assessment. In discussing her career history, Linda explained that throughout her career, she had demonstrated strong managerial and interpersonal skills. As a result, she continually found herself drawn into positions of leadership or situations that required her to be “in the public limelight,” such as representing management in video presentations. While these experiences were exciting, at the same time she always viewed herself as being under a heavy burden of responsibility and felt isolated and cutoff from others. Linda views her career story in terms of making the transition from the corporate world to another, as yet undefined, work setting. She is hopeful that the new setting will get her “off the mountain” and provide her both with opportunities for greater connectivity with others and involvement in an inspiring and purposeful life mission.

Conclusions

Within this article, I have suggested that visual metaphors can constitute an important part of the narratives that form our career and life stories. In doing so, they provide us with a useful method for integrating the emotional and symbolic aspects of our life experiences and career aspirations. Visual metaphors provide counselors and researchers with views into the unique world perspectives of their clients. The visual images that Carlos and Linda selected serve as symbolic vehicles for constructing their unique career stories (Baskinger & Nam, 2006) and for giving voice to their future projections of those stories.

Although some researchers (Inkson, 2002; Smith-Ruig, 2008) have attempted to classify career professionals’ metaphors through the use of generic categories, such as “career as journey,” the constructivist perspective asserts that visual metaphors gain their power only when they are examined through each individual’s unique interpretive framework. This concept of unique interpretation is demonstrated within these case studies. When asked to select metaphors that described their career stories to the present moment, Carlos and Linda both selected images of solitary figures (the person in the boat and the lone mountain climber). In addition, both described their desired futures in terms of images that showed them deeply involved with others. However, as we listen carefully to each of these individuals, we see important differences emerge. Linda’s future metaphor highlighted the elements of being emotionally connected and aligned with others who can challenge her ideas, while partnering with her to serve a broader vision. For Carlos, the image of the
rowing group served as a metaphor for the level of team support and leadership mentoring that he is looking for in his immediate future. Carlos’s long-term vision is once again represented by the solitary individual (the cello soloist), representing his long-term goal of being finally recognized as a deeply skilled professional.

By acknowledging the unique interpretative frameworks through which clients construct their personal career narratives, the visual metaphor technique shares with other constructivist approaches a respect for the differing needs and views of racially and ethnically diverse clients. Constructivist counseling approaches also acknowledge the embedded power imbalances that can occur when counselors work with marginalized clients and seek to address such imbalances by understanding and valuing the world views of clients and by acknowledging the client’s voice in goal setting and meaning construction (Christians, 2000; Maree et al. (2006). Grant and Johnston (2006) suggest that the use of narratives “is especially appropriate in working with clients from traditionally oppressed groups, such as women and racial and ethnic minorities” because this approach “literally ‘gives voice’ to individuals or groups that have been silenced throughout history” (p. 115). Similarly, Peavy (1998) contends that constructivist counseling approaches foster a greater sensitivity to cultural diversity by acknowledging the validity of different cultural meaning perspectives, helping clients and counselors establish common ground, and respecting the developmental value played by symbols, myths, and metaphors. As a tool for eliciting visual metaphors, the VE2™ Deck provides clients with a rich array of visual metaphors for crafting their career narratives, through the use of images that are diverse with respect to cultural settings and ethnicity. By providing clients with a vehicle for constructing visual career metaphors and narratives, which are personally meaningful, this approach has the potential for helping counselors support the counseling needs of diverse client groups.

As a final consideration, I would contend that the constructivist perspective also speaks to what is transformative in the use of visual metaphors. The idea that metaphors can act as powerful transformative vehicles is an argument put forth by many theorists (Boyd and Myer, 1988; Cranton, 1994; Dirkx, 2000; Grabov, 1991). These researchers suggest that transformational learning extends beyond the rational, analytical evaluation of one’s beliefs and assumptions to include more intuitive ways of knowing that are mediated by imagined images (dreams, myths, and fantasies), symbols, and metaphors. Kramer (2000) has suggested that “the most important and existential dilemmas in life often do not lend themselves to linear and rational modes of thinking. They may require alternative modes of representation, such as imagery, art, metaphor and non-linear ‘logic’” (p. 85). Within this case study, follow-up discussions with both participants suggested that they felt that they had obtained a great deal from their participation in this exercise. Carlos indicated that the process “helped me step back and reflect more clearly on where I’m headed”. Linda explained that, “It added a lot of clarity to my thought process . . . I’ve come to realize that I want different things as I move into the future.”
It is easy to form the conclusion that the use of visual images as metaphor merely helps individuals articulate thoughts and feelings that would otherwise be difficult to express. An alternative interpretation and one proposed here is that as clients share their stories they engage counselors in the coconstruction of meaning, with visual metaphors serving as an important component of this meaning construction. Palus and Drath (2001) have proposed that a concrete artifact, image, or drawing can provide a vehicle for fostering a “mediated dialogue,” by helping bridge the gap between the different meaning perspectives of the speaker and listener (p. 29).

The VE2™ deck is only one of several approaches that make use of visual metaphors as an assessment methodology. A related technique, which involves having clients select metaphorical images from a printout of images, was previously described by Gareth Morgan (1997) as a method for assessing coaching clients. In this approach, clients are asked to select metaphorical images that represent their leadership styles. Comparative feedback is then obtained from the client’s peers and team members, who individually select metaphorical images that represent their views of the client.

Some therapeutic counselors (Lawley & Tompkins, 2003) have encouraged clients to draw visual metaphors, as a means of representing how they view difficult life-adjustment challenges. In addition, counseling supervisors have had counselors draw visual metaphors as a means of symbolically representing client cases (Amundson, 1988). Finally, visual metaphors have been used as symbolic vehicles for helping work professionals (Zuboff, 1989) and teams (Barner, 2008) give voice to their responses to complex organizational changes.

These different approaches to the use of visual metaphors lead to the question of whether there are comparative advantages to the use of ready-made metaphorical images, such as VE2™, as opposed to having clients draw their own visual images. Unfortunately, no published research has yet addressed this question. However, based solely on my experience in working with visual metaphors, I would suggest that the use of ready-made images may prove helpful to those clients who feel intimidated when faced with the task of attempting to convey their thoughts and feelings in drawings. In addition, this approach requires far less time for preparation, giving clients more time to focus on self-reflection and analysis. Finally, the use of ready-made visual metaphors may serve as a prompting mechanism for encouraging clients in creative self-exploration.

However, requiring individuals to draw their own metaphorical images forces them to reach inside themselves to construct images that represent their unique life perspectives. In addition, this approach provides an avenue through which clients can progressively build on their reflections. An example is provided by the symbolic modeling approach developed by Lawley and Tompkins (2003). In this method, clients are encouraged to use their initially constructed visual metaphor drawings as a scaffold for more thoroughly developing their life stories. As clients elaborate upon their stories, they are encouraged to continue to add metaphorical elements to their drawings, until their complete “metaphorical landscapes” have been fully constructed (Lawley & Tompkins, 2003; p. 26). Using a similar technique, the author
has (Barner, 2008) encouraged work members to work through successive, iterative drawings to reach agreement on a final visual metaphor that captures their consolidated thoughts and feelings regarding significant organizational change events. The assumption here is that if we assume that visual metaphors constitute a type of narrative text, then changes in metaphorical elements that occur from drawing to drawing can be treated as alternations in meaning to that narrative over the course of a group’s discussion.

In summary, the use of visual metaphors is beginning to be explored as an innovative assessment method within career counseling, with additional applications that include therapeutic counseling, executive coaching, and organizational assessment. Although much still remains to be learned about the most effective way to use this methodology, it is hoped that the cases presented here shed light on the potential application of this constructivist assessment methodology to career counseling.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References


**Bio**

Robert William Barner has had 25 years of experience in the fields of leadership and professional development, including executive positions within five private-sector companies. He is currently the associate director of executive education within the School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University. Dr. Barner is the author of five books on career counseling and leadership development, with three foreign language translations. He has been a contributor to several university texts, has written over 40 articles for academic journals, and has been a reviewer for both the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* and the *Journal of Management Development*. 