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# ***Life Design Dialogue – A New Form of Career and Life Design Interventions***

This paper describes theoretical foundations and methodology of life design dialogues. They are meant to help people conceive of, construct and direct their active lives. Contrary to employability guidance interventions, these dialogues do not operate on the assumption that people always respond to the active life issue by making their life meaningful through fitting in present work organizations and exchange (without excluding such an answer). These dialogues were elaborated by a synthesis of knowledge in humanities and social sciences relating to the process and factors involved in the construction of self. This synthesis describes subjective identity as a dynamic system of subjective identity forms. It also assumes that a person plays a role in this system's dynamics through two forms of reflexivity: dual and trine. It is mainly the latter that is mobilized during the life design dialogue, which consists in face-to-face meeting including four moments: (1) constructing a working alliance, (2) making an inventory of activities, experiences, roles etc., that the individual considers to be playing an important role in their life, (3) personal narratives relating to „her/himself during all of her/his different major experiences” that allow them to sketch visions of the future that make their existence meaningful and (4) defining further actions, kinds of behaviour to develop and conclusion of the dialogue.

**Keywords:** Cognitive identity frame, construction of the self, counselling dialogue, subjective identity form, life design, dual reflexivity, trine reflexivity.

## **Introduction**

An analysis of career and life design interventions that have been developed in modern societies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows that majority of them can be deemed ‘employability guidance’. These interventions – “les bilans de compétences” (competencies’ elicitation device) being their prototype in France – have as

their final purpose to boost maximum growth of the existing economic system. Their determined objective is to help people get included in the world of professional functions within existing organizations and exchange of work. Life design interventions begun to take shape in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – especially the career construction interview by Mark Savickas (2009, 2011, 2013) and life design dialogues (Guichard, 2008; Guichard et al., 2017). The final purpose of such interventions is to help people lead active lives that they feel are good (‘successful’). Their determined objective is to support individuals in constructing perspectives of the future and formulating such life norms that will allow them to direct their existence and make it meaningful (Guichard, 2018a).

This paper presents the methodology of life design dialogues by presenting their scientific grounding and illustrating them with examples. The paper consists of three parts. First, we recall the wide scope of an epistemic framework underpinning different life design interventions, i.e. the constructivist approaches. In the second part, we present the theory of life design dialogues, i.e. central concepts of the ‘construction of the self’ model (fr. ‘*se faire soi*’ Guichard, 2004, 2005). The third part describes the methodology of implementing such a dialogue.

## **1. Constructivist models: the epistemic framework underpinning different life design interventions**

All life design interventions are based on the constructivist-constructionist epistemology. The common premise of different psychological and sociological constructivist and constructionist paradigms is that different world phenomena to which we (people) relate through our perception and actions are cognitively (and actively) constructed and depend on our social interactions, linguistic categories and expectations; they give meaning to the world in which we live (Collin, Guichard, 2011). Life design interventions are meant to help people in their construction of the self. The self is one of the phenomena of the human world. It was defined by William James (1890) as a relation of synthesis by an ‘I’ of a set of ‘me’ (each of these “me” corresponding to a representation that an individual makes of him/herself in one of his/her contexts of interactions). The self is a process of synthesis, unification and aggregation of experiences that constitute a human life course. It cannot thus be identified as an entity, as a property or as a set of personality traits. It is, as Michael Mahoney summarized (2002, p. 748) – “a complex system of active and interactive self-organizing processes”. This system is not given, but constructed. It is “a complex mental edifice that one constructs by the use of a variety of mental processes” as noted by Jerome Bruner (1994, p. 41). Jonathan Raskin (2002, p. 7), using “personal

constructs” theory by George Kelly (1963), concludes that the self is “generated by the way a person successively construes himself or herself”.

Some core constructs are generated early in infancy, before the development of language. They are thus “deeply embedded and intransigent” and “impermeable to self-reflection and alteration”, and so seem to be “unfiltered truths” rather than constructions, and give an enduring sense of self (Raskin, 2002, p. 7). However, the constructivist models emphasise the significance of contexts within which individuals interact and are interrelated (Pepper, 1942). The self is constructed contextually through relationships – that is what the relational approach emphasises. It stresses the significance of interpersonal relations and attachments. This has led to the emergence of the concept of an ‘embedded self’ by Ruthellen Josselson (1988) and David Blustein (1994; Blustein, Noumair, 1996).

As such, self-awareness cannot be “the discovery or release of some innate ‘I’; it is a construction built on other people’s responses and attitudes towards a person, and is subject to change as these responses, inherently variable and inconsistent, change in character” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 150). Consequently, as noted by Jonathan Raskin (2002, p. 18), constructivist approaches consider that an individual is “socially constituted within the boundaries of culture, context, and language... [and hence has] a multitude of identities that are negotiated and defined within specific interpersonal relationships”.

The self does not, however, refer only to past or present experiences. Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius thus proposed the concept of ‘possible selves’. They note:

Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation. Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. Possible selves are important, first, because they function as incentives for future behaviour (i.e., they are selves to be approached or avoided) and second, because they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self (Markus, Nurius, 1986, p. 954).

Taking into account the contexts in which construction of the self is happening, goes hand in hand with stressing the role played by the society, culture and their symbolic systems, including, in particular, language and stories. Jonathan Raskin wrote “How people talk about themselves and their world determines the nature of their experiences” (Raskin, 2002, p. 18). Rom Harré, on the other hand, notes that the self is “produced discursively, that is in dialogue and other forms of joint action with real and imagined others” (Harré, 1998, p. 68). The usual notion of self is “a useful fiction” (...): [Rather than] “the singularity we each feel ourselves to be”, self is “a site from which a person perceives the world and a place from which to act” (Harré, 1998, pp. 3–4).

In constructivist and constructionist models the self is constructed by means of stories. The self is “a perpetually rewritten story” (Bruner, 1994, p. 53), “a configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 150). Narrative pulls the disparate elements of a person’s life into “a single unfolding and developing story” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 150), a continuing and coherent whole. “The reflexive project of the self... consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5).

Constructing self, then, is a continuous, dynamic process from which self emerges and is never complete. It is an active process of negotiating, organizing, synthesizing, integrating, and reflecting. While it forms a trajectory from the past to the anticipated future (Giddens, 1991), the process of constructing it takes place in the present: “in the interactive moment... as the moment unfolds” (McNamee, 1996, p. 149). All we can know of the constructing present is in retrospect, but it can be understood through the narratives in which individuals (re)construe their life from the perspective of some anticipated futures. Moreover, although this constructing is a cognitive activity, it follows through into action and could, indeed, be understood as action (Mignot, 2004).

To summarize, it can be stated that the constructivist approaches to the dynamics of individual subjectivities differ from previous views on the development of human subjects. Whereas the latter put an emphasis on the stability of the individual personality both in time and across contexts of interactions and interlocutions, the constructivist approaches describe human individuals as being less unified and homogenous than it was previously assumed. Individuals are, therefore, described as ‘plural’ (Lahire, 1998; Rowan, Cooper, 1999), as speaking in different voices (Gergen, 1991, 2011), as combining different ‘I’ positions (Hermans, Kempen, 1993), as composed of a set of „self efficacy beliefs” (Bandura, 1986), as forming a dynamic system of „subjective identity forms” (Guichard, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2008), etc. Secondly, the same approaches stress that such plural human subjects seek to attain unity, coherence and meaning in their lives. They do this through elaboration of certain life themes (Csikszentmihalyi, Beattie, 1979; Savickas, 2005, 2011, 2013) and by constructing a biographical narrative (Ricoeur, 1985, 1990; Delory-Momberger, 2009, 2012) around certain plots that bring meaning to their past and present lives from some future perspectives. Thirdly, these analyses do not assume that, like in previous models, individual behaviours and representations are immediately determined by early or past experiences of the individual. Rather, constructivist models insist on the mediating role of the meaning-making process (Malrieu, 2003), of the (re-)interpretation and symbolisation (Wiley, 1994), of dialogues (Jacques, 1982), and different kinds of relations to self and its experiences (Foucault, 2008), etc., in the determination of concepts of the self and individual behaviour. Contemporary neuroscience highlights brain plasticity, with our brain remodelling its

connections according to the environmental and contextual factors, in order to refashion the past according to the present. A major outcome of such a change of perspective is that human actors are nowadays thought to be equipped with a greater agency (at least potential) than in the past (Bandura, 2006).

All life design interventions (Savickas et al., 2009) relate to this new scientific look on human subjects. It is also the case of life design dialogues (or self-construction interviews – Guichard, 2008; Guichard et al., 2017), based on theoretical premises – i.e. the self-constructing model – presented below.

## ***2. The ‘construction of the self’ model: theoretical basis of life design dialogues***

The model of ‘construction of the self’ forming the basis for the elaboration of life design dialogues is a synthesis of constructivist approaches, stemming from different fields and sub-fields of humanities and social sciences, relating to the construction of individual subjectivities - to the phenomena of subjectification. Four core concepts of such a synthesis are „cognitive identity frame”, “dynamic system of subjective identity forms”, “dual reflexivity” and “trine reflexivity”.

### **2.1 From social- categories and categorizations to cognitive identity frames**

#### **– People construct themselves in social contexts**

The model of self-construction is based on the observation that the construction of the self happens in social contexts. These contexts offer people, who interact and conduct within them dialogues, some ‘ready-made’ social categories, certain ways of elaborating new categories (many of which are local and short-lived), as well as scenarios (narrations, narrative scripts such as model stories of self-actualisation, etc.), allowing people to interpret and aggregate different events and experiences – of all kinds – which mark the course of their life.

In order to describe these phenomena, the sociologist Claude Dubar (1992, 1998a, b, 2000) devised the concepts of identity offer, identity form, relational and biographical transactions and narrative identity. According to Dubar, each society defines a certain identity offer – mainly consisting of diverse systems of social categories and categorizations in which everyone can (by interpreting their diverse experiences and behaviours) recognise themselves and/or others (by interpreting everyone’s perceived or imagined behaviour). This offer can relate to a land or a language (people can define themselves e.g. as Breton, as French, etc.), to an occupation or an activity (a mechanic, a guitar player, etc.), to a socio-demographic category (a manager, a high school student...), to a group („we at Renault”, „we, the supporters of the PSG”), to a religion or an ideological

movement (a Catholic, an eco-activist, a fascist...), to ethnic or foreign origins, to sexual orientation, medical or mental classification, traits of a characterology, etc.

Such offer is relatively stable, but it evolves and undergoes transformation. Through their collective actions, interactions and language games, individuals develop unedited narrations based on certain models of life stories that are offered to them. In this way they contribute to the production of new categories, which, in the beginning, are usually local, before some of them become generalized and durable. Quite a few of these emerging categories – which Dubar calls identity forms (not to be mistaken with subjective identity forms described below) – are connected with vindictive collectivities who suggest interpretative categories that allow them to re-evaluate or devalue the image of certain groups (gay, ‘Arabs’, islamophobes, populists, etc.). As event go by, marking the passage of time in the history of a specific group, some of these categories prove long-lived, while others become obsolete. It is the case, e.g. of the category ‘*zazou*’ in French, which became cognitively significant in France in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has now disappeared. However, nowadays in Europe, it is the categorisations based on religion that are gaining significance.

Dubar described the construction of individual identities as an ‘appropriation’ (which cannot, therefore, mean simple identification) by individuals of some of these categories – they interpret events and experiences that mark the course of their life by referring to certain categories. Three processes play a key role in this appropriation: relational transactions, the biographical transaction and the construction, by an individual, of a life course narrative.

The relational transaction is a process of self-definition linked to the recognition of self by the other. Such translation is based on the attribution acts by the other (for example, a teacher may tell a student that she is “a real math champion”) and the acts of belonging, i.e. of recognition of self as such (a student may say “I’m a natural in maths”). For an individual, the gain of the relational transaction is to be recognized as someone who they wish to be recognized as. Or, following Dubar (1998a, p. 112), there is no necessary connection between the ‘self-predicting identity’ [the one where an individual recognizes her/himself] which expresses a unique identity of a given person, with their individual lived-history and the ‘identities attributed by others’. A person can, for example,

be classified by the other in a way that they reject and find unjust. It is not the matter of a simple interpersonal disagreement, but rather of faulty use of social norms. Actually, certain people or groups abuse their position in order to construct people they wish to destabilize by referring to them with an identity trait that should not be mentioned. Most frequently, the injury consists in reminding someone their belonging to an encompassing community” (Singly, 2004, p. 87).

Relational transactions work towards forming a plural subjective identity. A biographical transaction is a process of unification of this plurality: it allows individuals to link their different acts of belonging (of recognition of self as

“such”) and the acts of rejection or ‘accommodation’ of some ‘stigmatising’ attributes within a narrative that unifies their life course, giving it continuity. It is a process by which the individuals anticipate their future on the basis of their past (Dubar, 1992, p. 520). Such transaction is based mainly on narratives of self or internal dialogues through which a person seeks to give meaning to their life course by articulating their diverse social belonging, and by inscribing them within a certain personal story (which means by imbuing them with meaning in relation to this personal story) that allows the individual to anticipate a specific future<sup>1</sup>.

What is at stake in the biographical transaction is the construction of a story about self and its possible futures. This story, resulting from the biographical transaction that synthesises different relational transactions of an individual, constitutes their subjective identity. It is nothing more than an narrative: a life story that people construct by telling it to themselves. There are no essential characteristics that make it possible to define an identity in itself – there is no “hard core” constituting the heart of an individual identity. It is not a substance – it belongs exclusively to the narrative order. Dubar noted that

if identities are neither ‘essences’ nor representations (of a ‘reality’ that cannot be seized by language), it is because they are stories, either those that one tells oneself about who one is (Laing, 1961, 1971), or those that one tells about the origin of the world. They cannot, therefore, be separated from the ways one narrates one’s or others’ lives around one or some emplotments (Ricoeur, 1983). The production of categories and arguments within these ‘narratives of self’ is, it seems to me, at the very core of the identity processes that always socially depend on the context in which they are produced (Dubar, 1998b, p. 98).

<sup>1</sup> Two transactions described by Claude Dubar can be approximated to the two reflection processes – comparative and probabilistic – described by Bernadette Dumora for highschool students (1988, 1990, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). The comparative reflection denotes a phenomenon of anticipation of self in an image of (generally) a professional figure. This anticipation builds up gradually between the age of 10 and 15. First, it is a simple identification-fusion with a kind of dream character. It then becomes richer, as years go by, in descriptive dimensions that are more and more abstract, making it possible to justify the comparison. One can put forward a hypothesis that such enrichment is linked to the specific feedback from others, like „I see you clearly / I don’t see you / as doing this or being such”, such feedback being part of larger processes of relational transactions. The probabilistic reflection builds up during the same period. In the beginning it is based on reasoning such as „it is enough to want it to be able to do it”. Around the age of 15, it becomes a vague calculation of probabilities of the subsequent academic success in one of hierarchically arranged branches of training. The probabilistic reflection can thus be considered as a form that the biographical transaction takes within the framework of the school system in which young people are included. Within this system, students anticipate their future on the basis of their past depending on the school standards that prevail in it, i.e. their marks in „important” fields of study. Around 15, French pupils that Dumora observed, already articulated the results of these two reflection processes, which led them to what she called ‘implicative logics’. She described six prototype ones, such as e.g. the logic of excellence of good students who focus on probabilistic reflection and set themselves a goal of „going as far as possible in the most selective fields of study”. It seems that these types of logic constitute what Claude Dubar (following Paul Ricoeur) called constitutive plots in the heart of narrative identities of the young who are then primarily students.



The emphasis put on the contexts and social relations in identity construction of individuals is sociology's key insight into the construction of individual subjectivities. The limitation of this contribution lies within the boundaries of sociology as a field of study that continues to overlook cognitive processes, which it takes for granted. In fact, people cannot be involved in the transactions described by Dubar unless they have cognitively constructed the categories, the process of social categorisation, and implement cognitive processing of this information (forming mental categories, structures, ways of information processing and problem solving, etc.). In other words, Dubar's model of individual identity construction assumes that the social world leads to the construction of mental structures and information processing.

This begs the question about which cognitive phenomena lead to the social phenomena described by Dubar. So far, there seem to be no available studies addressing this issue. However, cognition experts describe multiple "cognitive constructs": schemas, categories, gradual structures, scripts, scenarios, cognitive frameworks, hierarchical systems of concepts, mental models, social representations, etc. In the absence of well-established knowledge on the subject, the review by Lawrence Barsalou in his chapter on the knowledge within memory (1992, pp. 148–185), provides a convincing case for the following double hypothesis. On the one hand, the multitude of experiences and events marking a person's life within their social contexts, lead them to construct, in memory, a system of cognitive identity frames corresponding to their mental organization of systems of social – categories and categorizations – as well as ways to make narratives of individual lives that are relevant in these social contexts. Such mental organization is thus a function of experiences and events marking the individual's life. On the other hand, in the same social contexts of interaction and interlocution, in their minds individuals construct a system of subjective cognitive identity frames that constitutes the cognitive basis of their perceptions of self and their behaviour in the different contexts in which they act, interact and engage in dialogues.

### **– In their minds, people construct long-term memorization structures relating to systems of social- categories and categorization**

The first aspect of this double cognitive hypothesis relates to the organisation, in memory, of the identity offer of a given society. The hypothesis is based on the concept of 'cognitive frame' put forward by Marvin Minsky, in Johnson-Laird, Wason, eds., (1977) in order to describe structured schemas of attributes having default value. This concerns large cognitive structures linking diverse phenomena stemming from perception and action, which allow people to make inferences in case some detailed information is missing. For example, a cognitive

frame corresponding to the word “room” comprises the following attributes: ceiling, floor, walls, door, window. Taking into account our experience, the default value of “wall” is four – when we speak about a room without providing other details, we imagine a room with four walls. The frame “room” also includes the idea that a room should have at least one door that one (this may mean ourselves) can use to enter by implementing certain scripts of action corresponding to a habitual act of opening doors (our procedural knowledge on the subject), etc.

The concept of ‘cognitive frame’ serves well to describe mental structures of memorisation of social- categories and categorizations. If, e.g. we hear about someone who works as “an engineer” without any other information, we infer that, as a gender attribute – it is a man, as profession attribute – that he is responsible for manufacturing or research in a company, as education attribute – that he holds specialised university degrees, as income attribute – that he has a good salary, etc. Within the terminology that we used here, the word “engineer” corresponds to a ‘cognitive identity frame’. Cognitive identity frames are organizing structures of long-term memory information regarding social categories or community categorizations of all kinds (in terms of gender, religion, social standing, sexual orientation, age, hobbies, political choices, character, typology, astrology, etc.)

Cognitive identity frames combine – especially – schemata relating to individual personality and scripts of actions. The schemata relating to personality correspond to what Jerome Bruner and Renato Tagiuri called (1954) the ‘implicit theories of personality’. This term acknowledges the fact that we, each of us, in perceiving and in the image that we construct of others, presuppose the existence of links between the characteristics and attributes that describe them. We consider that some personality traits go together, whereas others seem to exclude one another. For example, we tend to think that a person that we believe to be honest and intelligent is also likeable and not violent. Cognitive identity frames also include scripts of action. The scripts or scenarios – as defined by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson (1977) – are coherent sequences of events that the individual expects, and in which they are included as participants or observers. For example, when we go to an ordinary restaurant, we know in advance what is going to happen and how we should behave – the waiter will give us the menu, then he will go away, we will read the menu, make a choice, the waiter will come back, we will tell him what our choice is, etc. Cognitive identity frames include such scripts of action – we imagine, e.g. that an engineer studies technical documentation and that he uses his computer to make calculations.

Cognition experts stress that within memory the concepts do not exist independently of each other, but they form conceptual systems (Barsalou, 1992, p. 177). As a result, in everyone’s mind, their cognitive identity frames form a system of cognitive identity frames. This system constitutes the cognitive

basis of our vision of the social world – for us the concept of an engineer is defined differently to that of a worker, a foreman, an book keeper, a CEO, etc. – as shown by the studies of profession-related cognitive frames (Gottfredson, 1981; Guichard, 2011). The cognitive identity frames system of a person is the cognitive structure, in his/her long-term memory of the identity offer by the society in which he/she lives, such as he/she was able to construct it during his/her actions, interactions and interlocutions. These take place in contexts that are inscribed in what Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1997) called “social fields”. They are relatively autonomous social domains (such as e.g. academic field, sports, etc.) that constitute the social macro-system. Each field – characterised by its own rules, norms, values and types of interest – forms a hierarchical structure of positions. Bourdieu considers that the individual constructs a certain habitus depending on his or her position in different social fields in which she/he interacts – this means his or her own repertory of perceptive frames, systems of representation and expectations, as well as action schemas. Combining these concepts by Dubar and Bourdieu with the concept of cognitive identity frame leads to the following hypothetical conclusion: The system of cognitive identity frames of each individual forms a cognitive structure in their long-term memory of the social offer in place within their societies, such as could be constructed during the individual’s actions, interactions and interlocutions, in line with the positions that the individual used to occupy, and occupy right now, in each of the social fields in which he or she has interacted or interacts.

**– It their long-term memory, people construct a system of memory structures for information relating to self that forms a basis of their subjective identity**

The second aspect of our cognitive hypothesis relates to the individual identity construction. This hypothesis holds, as noted earlier, that in his or her mind an individual constructs a system of subjective cognitive identity frames which cognitively support the individual’s perceptions of self and one’s behaviour in different contexts in which he or she acts, interacts and engages in dialogue. The concept of subjective cognitive identity frames (SCIF) aims to account for the fact that when an individual memorizes information about self in relation to a cognitive identity frame, the default values of cognitive frame attributes acquire particular values, the schemas or implicit theories of personality become the schemas of self (Markus, 1977), the scripts of actions, interactions and interlocutions become more precise, and strong sensations, emotions and feelings are linked to them, etc. For example, when an engineer thinks about him or herself as an “engineer”, they activate/actualize in their mind a whole set of long-term memory structures that relate to their actual work, current tasks, interactions

with colleagues, hierarchical relations in the workplace, own and social images of self at work, one's professional skills, one's past in this kind of activity, one's education, possible futures, etc. All in all, the cognitive structure in long-term memory of "I-engineer" is, in the mind of an individual thinking about him or herself as such, quite different and much richer than that of "engineer in general" – just as demonstrated in the work of Marisa Zavalloni and Christiane Louis-Guérin (1984), and by Pierre Tap (1986, 1988) with his concept of 'identification'.

Just like other cognitive frames, a subjective cognitive identity frame cannot exist in isolation in a person's mind – it is linked to other subjective identity frames that are part of the whole system of cognitive identity frames. In individual memory such system organizes schemas of perception and action, as well as emotions, feelings, sensations, etc. relating to individuals themselves in different present, past or anticipated contexts. These subjective cognitive identity frames form (except in pathological cases of divided self or of ego's splitting) a unified system in the person's mind. This hypothesis is supported by empirical observations, such as made by Michel Foucault who wrote that the subject is not a substance, but a form which is not the same everywhere and all the time. People do not have the same kind of relation to themselves when they constitute themselves as political subjects who are going to vote or who make a speech at an assembly and when they are seeking to fulfil their sexual desire in a relationship. There are, no doubt, relations and interferences between these different forms of subject but we are not dealing here with the same type of subject. In each case, we play, we establish towards ourselves different forms of relating (Foucault, 1984, pp. 718–719).

For an individual to be able to relate to him or herself differently, according to the moments and contexts, just as Foucault described, it is necessary that they can use different cognitive structures, each of which is a memory of one of the forms in which individuals constitute themselves in each moment. But these different structures must also be connected to each other, which means that they form a system of subjective cognitive identity frames. This also means that the individual's long-term memory includes a layout of cognitive structures, each of which relates to him or herself in one of the domains of present experience ("I-the-engineer", "I-the-father", "I-the-union-activist", etc.), past experience ("I-the-student of...", "I-the-son of...", etc.) or anticipated experience ("I-the-pensioner managing a rural bed-and-breakfast in Lozère", etc.).

In order for such a system to form a whole – i.e. for the individual not to have a lived subjective experience of a divided self (Laing, 1965), or a splitting ego – in their long-term memory there need to be cognitive connections between different subjective cognitive identity frames. Such links between SCIF are based on certain attributes which, in a given SCIF, refer to other SCIF. For example,

long-term memory of a person can contain the SCIF “I-the-engineer”, which may include the attribute “excellent professional”. This “excellent professional” attribute may be cognitively related to the following attributes: “excellent professional at the expense of the time devoted to my children’s education” (link to the SCIF “I-the-father”) and “excellent professional whose qualities are not fully recognized in the company because of my involvement in the trade unions” (link to the SCIF “union activist”). Some of these cognitive links reveal the structure, in a given moment, of the system of subjective identity frames of the person. Thus, the attribute “excellent professional at the expense of the time devoted to my children’s education” tends to indicate the key position of the subjective cognitive identity frame “I-the-engineer” and a more peripheral one: “I-the-father”.

It is worth noting that the system of cognitive identity frames is an inferred cognitive substratum that seeks to describe cognitive structures in long-term memory. Such structures are unconscious. The system of subjective cognitive identity frames of a person is a cognitive basis – not conscious – of the person’s subjective identity. Such identity is always more or less explicit to the person, it corresponds to a whole set of their ways of being, acting, perceiving (themselves and others), feeling, etc. in different present, past and anticipated contexts. The subjective identity of a person is defined as a dynamic system of subjective identity forms (narrative snippets of the person’s internal language maintaining its structure’s tension) – a system of which the person can become more or less aware depending on the contexts and moments in their life, by relating to their subjective identity frames system in long-term memory.

The relationship between a subjective identity form (SIF) and the corresponding SCIF consists in activation-actualisation. One’s behaviour in a given situation (what one perceives and feels, one’s conduct, etc.) is determined by an immediate activation of the SCIF that allows one to decode situation (which means that e.g. an engineer spontaneously “functions” according to the dimensions of his or her subjective cognitive identity frame “I-the-engineer” when at work). However, activation of a cognitive frame cannot be distinguished from its actualisation, as no actual situation corresponds in all aspects to the elements that, as they are encoded in long-term memory, would allow the individual to orient themselves and act. Some situations bring forth a significant actualisation of SCIF that they refer to (this could happen, for example, to an engineer, if some new superior joins the company). Using the terminology elaborated by Jean Piaget (1967), we can say that the construction and the functioning of self in a relation to a specific subjective identity frame in a given moment lead to accommodating some attributes of the subjective cognitive identity frame in long-term memory and that such accommodation is later assimilated within the cognitive frame which is thus transformed.

The system of subjective cognitive identity frames of a person is thus a “storage” of the person’s subjective memory. The system transforms relatively slowly. It evolves, just like we noted, in line with actions, interactions, dialogues, emotions, sensations, etc. of the person in different everyday life situations. But it also evolves in line with transformations of the identity offer in the social contexts within which the person interacts. This means that, from the point of view of the structures that organize memory, this depends on the transformations of an individual’s system of cognitive identity frames. For example, the SS general Otto Ohlendorf, whose system of subjective identity frames was organized around the project of being an incarnation of the subjective identity form “I-the-perfect-Nazi” (as shown by an analysis of his biography by Philippe Malrieu, 2003) could not conceive of himself, or behave according to such identity form before 1920s and the emergence of the Nazi movement (and of the matching social category, followed by a corresponding cognitive identity frame). Also, the system of subjective cognitive identity frames of a person evolves in life with their memory characteristics. It can get completely deleted, just as we see in terminal stages of some mental conditions that affect memory. Finally, the system of subjective cognitive identity frames of a person can also be revised during life design interventions, especially, as we will see, during life design dialogues.

## **2.2 Subjective identity as a dynamic system of subjective identity forms**

As mentioned in the introduction, life design dialogue aims to help a person to form perspectives that will allow them to bring meaning to their subjective identity. It is thought of as ‘a dynamic system of subjective identity forms’ (anchored in a system of subjective cognitive identity frames), and the formulation of such perspectives by the person involves analytical work on their principal subjective identity forms (i.e. becoming aware of key constitutive attributes of the corresponding subjective cognitive identity frame) and the relations between these forms, in order to detect certain groups of expectations that the person can then elucidate.

The work that the person carries out during a life design dialogue involves a reflection on their system of subjective identity forms. This reflection results in an activation-actualisation of different underlying subjective cognitive identity frames that make up their system of subjective cognitive identity frames. Such activation-actualisation can bring transformation of some of their frames and, in case personal reflection leads to a formulation of perspectives that the person did not think about in the beginning – perspectives that sometimes constitute a real existential turn – it can also bring a profound transformation of the system of subjective cognitive identity frames (just as in the example of Hamza below).

### – A system of subjective identity forms

We have just shown that the subjective identity is sometimes plural (made of subjective identity forms), unified (a system) and evolving (dynamic). It is defined as a system of subjective identity forms. A subjective identity form (SIF) consists, primarily, in a set of ways of being, doing, acting, interacting and conducting dialogue within a certain context; secondly – in perceptions and conceptions (connected with this context) of self, others and objects that are significant within this context; and thirdly – in diverse affective states, sensations, feelings, emotions, etc. felt as ‘such’ in this context. For example, when a young girl says: “In my high school, what interests me most are my friends”, she has just begun to describe her SIF “I-the-schoolgirl”.

One SIF (sometimes two) usually is/are more important than others in the SIF system of a person at a given point in their lives. Such SIF have a central position in people’s SIF systems. A SIF can be seen as central in a dynamic system of a person’s SIF when, first, the person hopes to accomplish something imminently significant for themselves “as such”, i.e. when this SIF corresponds to a domain in their lives where they wish to attain a certain degree of excellence that will make their life meaningful; secondly, when this person When the person experiences, as such (= in relation to this SIF), some positive affects that matter a lot to them; and thirdly, when other SIF of their SIF system find (at least partially) their meaning in relation to it (e.g. if a person says: “I go swimming to keep in shape to succeed at my exams”, probably the SIF “swimmer” is peripheral in relation to their SIF “student” that is, in all likelihood, central to this person); and fourthly, in a lot of cases, when the SIF corresponds to the expectation of attaining a future goal that is important for the person.

This goal corresponds to an anticipated SIF that the person hopes to construct. For example, a study focusing on four young high-level athletes (Szejnok, 2012) showed that, for each of them, the figure of a champion on the Olympic podium was a major constitutive element of an anticipated SIF which was bringing coherence and meaning to their present ascetic life, allowing them to go through, with some pleasure, the suffering linked to the intensity of everyday training.

SIFs which include such self-actualising expectations determine the organization of a person’s dynamic system of subjective identity forms at a given time. This system is then organised in line with such perspective of self-actualisation that makes a person’s life meaningful at that moment. In many cases this central SIF is related to a past SIF that played an important role in the person’s life or that corresponds to major expectations, vis-à-vis this person, held by other people whose opinion he or she deemed important. For example, most top-level athletes we mentioned earlier discovered their discipline (and competition) through one of their family members (father, mother, uncle, etc.), a figure with whom they identified as children.

The figure below illustrates the concept of ‘a system of subjective identity forms’. It evokes an image from the point of view of a fictitious young man – we shall call him Hasni – and his SIF system at the end of a life design dialogue. This example was constructed through synthesis of different observations of real-life cases described by Zaihia Zéroulou (1988) in a paper “*La réussite scolaire des enfants d’immigrés. L’apport d’une approche en termes de mobilisation*” [Academic success of immigrant children: Contribution of an approach focusing on mobilisation] and by Aziz Jellab (2001) in the book “*Scolarité et rapport aux savoirs en lycée professionnel*” [Schooling and relationship to knowledge in a vocational secondary school]. The young protagonist, aged 17, was born in France to Moroccan immigrant parents. He is a student in vocational secondary school focusing on IT.

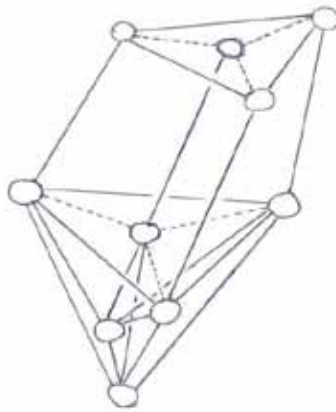


Figure 1. Hasni's SIF system (fictional example)

Each circle in the figure above represents a SIF and the lines (continuous) or (dotted) represent relationships between these SIF. Four circles in the middle are the SIF that correspond to present domains of Hasni's experience. One of these SIF is central – it corresponds to Hasni's major investment nowadays: “I-Hasni-the-high-school-student-preparing-for-A-levels-in-IT-anticipating-the-future-as-undergraduate-university-student”. Such ‘subjective academic identity form’ reflects the description of some high school students provided by Jellab (2001) who constructed a ‘reflexive form of relationship to knowledge’. This means that Hasni, first of all, is committed to abstract knowledge and academic work, more than to practical work and, secondly, that he considers himself to be “good” in abstract fields (especially maths) that he values (self-efficacy belief). Thirdly, Hasni sees himself as talented and hard-working (self-efficacy belief or self-esteem). Fourthly, he thinks that his academic future depends on



him (feeling of self-determination) and that he expects to be able to continue his studies in his chosen fields. Still in the middle, the circle to the right denotes the SIF “working weekends in a small IT user support company”. In this context, Hasni constructs scripts of action and ways of relating to oneself, to others and to his experiences beyond the school context. He thus sees himself as capable of quickly diagnosing a problem and of clearly explaining it to the clients, along with the ways to solve it. Moreover, he concludes that his relationships with them are usually excellent (some of these clients would also be ready to help him e.g. find an internship, a summer job, collect information about a training, etc.). Other circles of the middle level denote, respectively: (circle on the left) “Hasni-a-youth-group-anti-discrimination-activist” and (circle below) “Hasni-the-boy-in-love-with-Nathalie”.

The central axis of the figure represents the past (bottom), the present (middle) and the future (top). The circle in the bottom denotes the SIF “Hasni-son-of-immigrant-parents-expecting-him-to-attain-academic-success”. Hasni’s parents’ situation is similar to that observed by Z eroulou (1988) in some migrant families – they came from a Moroccan city where they were schooled, then they left the country together to pursue a project of improving their social status in France. Valuing academic success (and, generally, work well done), they were always vitally interested in their children’s school work and ensured that their children were able to do their homework. They also participated, as far as possible, in the parent-teacher meetings at school. Moreover, they considered that Islam (which they did not practice, but which they respected) is compatible with ordinary life in a western democracy. Hasni took up this value system and the representations which help him define perspectives that now are making his life meaningful. He wishes to live up to his parents’ expectations. The circle right above (slightly to the left) represents the SIF that could be called “Hasni-having-my-experience-of-being-a youth-in-my-town-and-school”. This SIF corresponds to different jarring experiences, on the one hand, the memories of a teacher, whose teaching methods captivated Hasni, and who emphasized Hasni’s good results, and on the other hand, frequent identity checks by the police whose attitude was sometimes far from being friendly.

The circle at the top of the figure is the SIF “IT-undergraduate student”. It corresponds to a fundamental hope that now brings meaning and coherence to Hasni’s life. This hope relates to expectations in three other domains (with which it does not clash). The circle at the very top is Hasni’s hoped-for SIF in professional domain: “electronics technician”. The protruding circle on top right is a hoped-for SIF in personal and family domain: “living as a couple and having children”. As far as the circle on top left is concerned, it refers to a still fuzzy hoped-for SIF: “political movement member”.

Let us stress, again, that Hasni’s example is fictitious. The system of subjective identity forms that a person elucidates during the life design dialogue

is not always as rich, coherent and arranged around one perspective that so clearly articulates past and present experiences, with such clear and concerted expectations. Some of these systems are, however, close to it, as shown by the real example of Hamza below.

### – A dynamic SIF system

Contrary to what the figure above might suggest, a person's SIF system is not a fixed structure. There are two categories of factors that play a role in its transformation. The first proceeds relatively slowly. A person's SIF system evolves in line with changes in their cognitive identity frame system, i.e. in line with the evolution of the way in which information about the identity offer provided by social contexts in which the person interacts is organized in their long-term memory. For example, as noted above, the SS general Ohlendorf could not assimilate on his own the cognitive identity frame "Nazi" in his cognitive identity frame system before this category became sufficiently widespread (the national socialist movement emerged in 1920). Only later he could create a subjective cognitive identity frame that constituted subjective identity form structure "I-seeking-to-attain-a-Nazi-ideal" in his long-term memory (central in his subjective identity form system), how his biography demonstrates. Born in 1907, in 1923 Ohlendorf created a youth section of Deutsche Volkspartei (the conservative party of the Weimar Republic, led by Gustav Stresemann). He joined the Nazi party two years later (and then joined the SS in 1926).

The second category of factors that play a role in the transformation of a person's SIF system comprises, on the one hand, all the changes and experiences that mark their life course and, on the other hand, the ways in which the individual feels and interprets them (in relation to the evolution of their system of subjective cognitive identity frames). Life course is marked by a whole series of apprenticeships, events, changes (maturation, successes, failures, accidents, encounters, aging, etc.) that form the person's life experience. These experiences play a key role in the transformation of the SIF system of an individual, both directly (e.g. due to an accident the person can no longer work) and indirectly, i.e. according to the way in which the person relates to a given experience – feels and interprets it – in line with the then preferred form of reflexivity.

We can distinguish two forms of reflexivity: dual and trine. We already mentioned dual reflexivity while talking about the example of high-level athletes. It was described by many authors, especially by Jacques Lacan (under the term mirror stage) (1966), Erik Erikson (1959) and Michel Foucault (talking about the techniques of the self; Foucault, 1982a, b, 1983a, b, 1984, 1988, 1994a, 1994b, 2008). We mean here a way of relating of self (as a subject) to self (as an object for self) from the point of view of some perfect state or some ideal that

a person wishes to attain. Such way of relating to self makes the person define and implement behaviour and actions that serve to make them what they wish to be. For example, Odile Piriou and Charles Gadéa (1999) demonstrated that some French sociology students defined themselves, even before they finished their studies, as “sociologists”, while others said they were “students” or “sociology students”. The former described the sociologist that they thought they had already become by using characteristics that contemporary media ascribed to the “great sociologist” Pierre Bourdieu. The students that saw themselves as “sociologists” were more successful in their studies, they obtained their Master’s degree, while others tended to drop out. The success of the former can be explained by a bigger personal investment in their studies that they already perceived as ordinary work of a sociologist that they thought they were. The ideal to be attained may correspond to the “exemplary” life narratives that are part of the identity offer of a society: narratives that also specify the acts that need to be performed and behaviour that leads to such perfect state.

Dual reflexivity is a stabilising factor of the SIF system: individuals who prioritized it, direct their life towards attaining the defined goal. Such reflexivity can still be dominant, even though events may contradict it. Szejnok (2012), in the study of high-level athletes, demonstrated that one of them continued to visualise himself on the Olympic podium and train accordingly even when he was beyond the average age of success in his discipline. The person’s reasoning then runs according to the process that Bernadette Dumora (1988, 1990) called the logic of illusion, i.e. a belief that an extraordinary event (a kind of miracle) will happen and allow the person to attain their goal. The product of such dual reflexivity can, after the trine reflexivity comes into play in the process, be re-interpreted and lead to considerations that will become part of the person’s life theme. For example, some sociology students who saw themselves as sociologists would become specialist educators. They then declared that they did this work “as sociologists”, i.e. by being more sensitive to the social factors and processes at play in individual behaviour that their colleagues (Piriou, Gadéa, 1999).

Second form of reflexivity is called “trine” – by referring to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (Colapietro, 1989) and Francis Jacques (1982) – because reflection then takes a form of a dialogue carried out between three positions, during which “I” tells “you” and “you” responds to “I”, or “I” and “you” make reference to “he/she”. This dialogue can be intra-individual (when the person who ponders a question enters a dialogue with herself) or/and inter-individual. In the second case, the dialogue is organised as follows:

- “I” tells “you” (“something”) (you = someone else or oneself),
- “You” understands “something” about “something” that “I” said,
- What “you” understands of “something” that “I” said was called by Peirce their “interpretant”,

- Using this interpretant “you” responds “something” to “I”,
- “I” then makes a new interpretant – what “I” understands about “something” that “you” answered,
- And so on...

The inter-individual dialogue is always also intra-individual. When “I” says something to “you”, “I” (taking the point of view of “you” of the interlocutor) asks itself if “you” has understood exactly what “I” wanted to say. In other words, “I” considers what he or she has just said from the perspective of potential ways of understanding it by the other “you” (during actual dialogue – mainly the “you” of their present interlocutor, such as “I” imagines them). As a result, both in inter-individual and intra-individual dialogues each turn produces a gap, in the mind of the dialogue participant, between what “I” says and what “I” understands they could have said from the point of view of the different “you”. These different “you” in the mind of the person who says something can be:

- “you”: what the dialogue participant believes their interlocutor could understand,
- “you”: what another real person among their acquaintances could understand or already understood in the past,
- “you”: what the person himself or herself could have understood in other life circumstances, etc.

In the mind of this individual, the process creates a polyphony of resonant “you” that echo what “I” says and that stir affective states (emotions, feelings, etc.) in the person that vary in nature (pride, shame, regret, remorse, anger, joy, sadness, etc.) and in intensity according to the “you” in relation to which they resonate – these affective states play an important role in the dynamics of the dialogue.

Trine reflexivity is mobilised when the person asks themselves about future perspectives that could make their life meaningful. This is especially the case when the internal narrative, which usually organizes their life and relationship to the world (their system of subjective identity forms) turns out to be insufficient to face a transition. They then need to rewrite the grammar of this narrative. In order to do that, the individual engages into dialogues with herself, with people close to her or with a counsellor. These dialogues lead her to narrate certain experiences (events, thoughts, emotions, etc.) of her past, present and, eventually, future life. On the one hand, narration of each of these experiences during the dialogue opens multiple new potential meanings and, on the other hand, stirs affective states in the narrator (more or less varied and more or less intense). This double phenomenon paves the way for creating approximation between experiences when, for example, narrating two experiences leads someone to say to themselves that these experiences have many commonalities or when such narration stirs in them similar affective states. Such narration can

also lead the narrator to establishing firm distinctions between categories of experience, or to confirm a specific position taken (when, e.g. the narrator states to herself that she needs to transform shame felt during certain experiences into pride). During this process each of the experiences being narrated is, in a way, first disentangled from specific life circumstances in which it happened. This “disentanglement” opens the way for new potential meanings and produces diverse affective states in the narrator. These new meanings and affective states are the basis for possible linking the narrated life experience with others (disentangled in the same way). Using the narration metaphor, we can say that story of each experience is first deconstructed (because of the polyphonic resonance of different “you” and the diversity of affective states it produces), and then reconstructed by relating it to other experiences: such linking being made possible through similarities of perceived meanings and of affective states. People thus elaborate certain potential perspectives for the future that can make their life meaningful.

### **2.3 “*Primum relationis*”: the dynamics of life design dialogue**

In life design dialogue the “polyphonic resonance of you” is exceptionally big, taking into account the specificity of the relationship between interlocutors. As Francis Jacques emphasised with his concept of *primum relationis* (Jacques, 1982), in each dialogue the relationship comes first – it is the relationship that creates specific positions in the minds of people in dialogue. That is the reason why in everyday life dialogues we speak in a relatively “predetermined” way. Let us think of a dialogue (real or imagined) e.g. between two spouses, or between a student and their teacher, etc. The “I”, the “you” and the “he/she” that are produced during such dialogues bear the stamp of this primary determinant – they are these “I-you-he/she” of habitual dialogues between spouses or those determined by the roles of a student and a professor that the two people incarnate, etc.

The situation is different in life design dialogue. Within it, the working alliance creates a relationship between one person (who by way of such relating becomes the client) who engages into dialogues with herself with the support of an counsellor. i.e. with another person whose only purpose (by the nature of the relationship) is to be there to support the client in their dialogue with him- or herself. Such relationship creates a possibility to make new relationships between “I-you” in the client’s mind. They can, thus, leave the well-trodden paths of their everyday life dialogues by creating new “I” which in the beginning are tentative “I”s. This phenomenon is one of major sources of this supporting method’s effectiveness.

Life design dialogue of Hamza illustrates this phenomenon. Hamza was a high school student in a final grade focussing on science (the most valued

branch in France). He came to see a counsellor to ask in which branches of higher education he could enter, taking into account the fact that his academic score was rather poor. Which could be interesting for him? What opportunities would they bring? While constructing working alliance, the counsellor suggested that they should take part in life design dialogue, to which Hamza agreed.

The dialogue was conducted in a usual way (see the next paragraph). It consists in, first, asking the client to identify the domains of activities, experiences, events, etc. that occupy an important place in their present life. Next, the same questions are asked about their past life and their expectations and anticipated future. Once the principal categories of significant experiences are identified, the client is asked to choose one of those that is especially significant for him/her and then to “talk about him/herself as such”, i.e. to tell the counsellor about the way he/she acts, interacts, perceives, feels, relates to him/herself and others, his/her expectations, etc. in this domain of experience. Such narrative is a description (resulting in awareness) of the SIF corresponding to this category of experiences. The work proceeds through similar narratives about other experience categories chosen by the client. As we noted, these narratives lead the client to feel certain affective states and to approximate, compare, distinguish, etc., certain points in these descriptions – affective states, approximations, comparisons, distinctions, etc. that form the sub-basis of future perspectives that get sketched in this way.

Hamza explained that there were four big experience categories in his present life. He was a student of a final science-oriented grade in high school. For many years he had trained younger football players and offered academic support to students facing challenges. Moreover, at present he was preparing to try and get his lifeguard certification. When the counsellor asked him to talk about himself as a high school student, Hamza declared that what made his life at school meaningful was his friends, among whom he was very popular. He said that classes bored him, that he didn't see much point in most of the academic domains, that he did not work efficiently, and that in this situation he was looking forward to enrolling in a short higher education course in an applied field (an IUT), but not knowing which one and not being really attracted to any. He specified that this attitude was the source of conflicts with his parents. At the beginning of the dialogue it seems that the SIF “Hamza-a high school student” corresponded to very limited expectations towards his future.

The situation was different in three other categories of experience that Hamza identified as important in his present life. Analysing each to become aware of the corresponding SIF, Hamza in fact brought together different activities in which he engaged and produced an encompassing interpretative concept: an interpretant corresponding to a future perspective that was meaningful for him. The analysis of the dialogic process that led him to such a conclusion shows

that he produced what we can call three “narrative I” – I offer academic support, I train young football players, I prepare for lifeguard tests. The same analysis suggests that on the occasion he “heard” these different “narrative I” from the point of view of a whole set of “you” – “you-the-counsellor” with whom he was in dialogue (what is she going to understand when I-Hamza say this?), “you-significant-others”, especially his father, who on hearing him say this would undoubtedly comment “in this way”, or who, in fact, had already reacted “in this way” in the past; “you-Hamza himself” being shocked at saying this in the context of the dialogue, etc.

Such polyphonic resonance of “you” echoing different “narrative I” – characteristic of the trine reflexivity – allows the client to bring closer these “I” and to compare them synchronically (in fact I do this and I do that) and diachronically (currently, I do this and previously I was doing that). In this way he can produce a (temporarily) final interpretant relating to what these “narrative I” have in common – which means an interpretation that attributes shared meaning to these different “narrative I”. Such (temporarily) final interpretant “I” is a more encompassing “I”. In this way, Hamza told himself: this “I” that does this and the “I” that does that and also the “I” that did that, etc. show me that “I want to be useful to others”. He pronounced this conclusion with much conviction at the second meeting with the counsellor: the more encompassing “I” is also an “I” that is more self-assured – “no doubt, it is the “I” that I am!”.

In order for this “encompassing and more self-assured I” resulting from trine reflexivity to become “the subject of action” (so that the narrator becomes the actor, and engages in making this “I” true or in excelling as such) it is necessary that this “I” becomes affectively invested. The “I” has to be an object of identification. The person needs to wish to become this “I”, that he/she imagines and desires to be. That is where the process of dual reflexivity comes in. As we noted, it allows the person to constitute themselves as an object for themselves, from the point of view of some ideal that they wish to attain. In adolescents and emerging adults (but not only them), such ideal generally corresponds to some anticipated SIF linked to the image of a figure with whom they identify. This anticipated and desired SIF then plays a decisive role in organizing their system of subjective identity forms.

The passage from trine to dual reflexivity is explicit in Hamza’s dialogue. During the first meeting with the counsellor he envisaged, several times, pursuing medical studies as a vague possibility having no chance of becoming true, due to his poor academic record. For the second meeting Hamza prepared a list of what he expected from his future active life. He declared (in the round 142): *“Here! I see myself as a doctor. And... mmmmm, my family life.* The counsellor was surprised: (143) *“All right. OK! So, can you explain this to me?”.* Hamza took his list: (144) *“Well, here, there are 10 things that are important in the profession”*

and he pointed to three first criteria that he identified: (1) a sufficient *income*, (2) *challenges*, (3) *social recognition*. Then, in round 180, Hamza mentioned the fourth criterion. It circumscribed the professional domain (and rejected others): “Here... *Being useful to others...*”. Counsellor (181) “You could not be... *Hmmm... I don’t know... A profession...? Hmmm? A buyer in a company?*”. Hamza (182): “Yes! *But...*”. Counsellor (183): “Yes...?”. Hamza (184): “*When we talk about helping others, a doctor... it fits! Treating people, it is the first idea that comes to mind... I think?*”. Counsellor (185); “*Hmm... and at the level of your values, is this important?*”. Hamza (186): “*Yeah*”. Counsellor (187): “*Hmmm... And you have an impression that there are some kinds of work that are not useful? To the society?*”. Hamza (188): “*No! Each kind of “work” is useful, I think. But... In the end... It is personal: in some kinds of work one has the impression of being more useful than in others*”. Counsellor (189): “*Hmmm...*”. Hamza (190): “*I, the doctor, I KNOW that it is my feeling*”. Hamza added (in round 404): “*Now (...) I already think about how to do it [to succeed in studying medicine]*”.

If Hamza switched here, without transition, from “being useful to others” (an interpretant that he constructed from the connections he made between three most important domains in his life) to the process of dual reflexivity: “I see myself as a doctor”, it is undoubtedly because, as he said before, his father had been telling him repeatedly: “I can well see you as a doctor”. In other words, the analysis made by Hamza of his important life domains led him to produce an interpretant corresponding to an anticipated SIF in line with his father’s expectations. Hamza concluded that the only way to attain this objective was to transform his way of being a high school student (his SIF “I- the student”) and, as a result, his other SIF (especially that of a sportsperson) which prevented him from having the requiring academic results to be able to study medicine. He specified all the changes that he needed to make in a figure (Figure 2, below). The figure makes a distinction between his life before the life design dialogue (top), what he needed to become now (middle), in order to be able to lead a future life (bottom) corresponding to his expectations. In other words, Hamza drew three simplified diagrams of his SIF system: the first reflecting what it used to be at the beginning of the life design dialogue and two others at the end. Hamza followed the program and considerably changed his high school student SIF. He made notes summarising and structuring the modules he took, spent each Saturday morning in the library to work there without access to his mobile phone, etc. He also temporarily suspended his other activities. At the end of the school year he received a distinction at his final exams and later went on to study medicine.



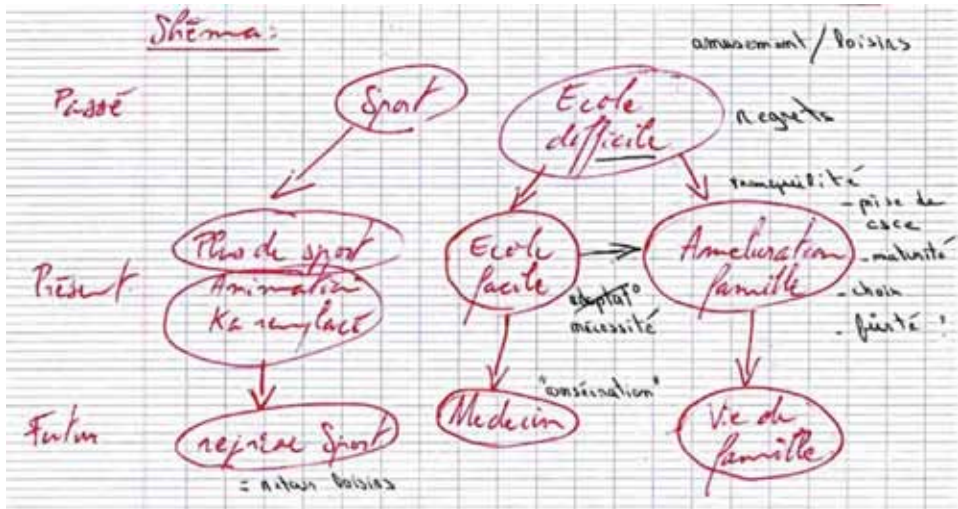


Figure 2. Hamza's diagram. Top: "my past life" (= before life design dialogue). Centre: my present life (= what I need to do now). Bottom: my future life (= what I hope to attain).

The two reflexivities combine in different ways, not always as harmoniously as above, in the life design dialogue. In some cases, dual reflexivity plays such an important role in organizing the individual SIF system that it is difficult for him or her to abandon such a well crystallized vision of the future – the perspective that has been giving meaning to his or her life for a long time. This is demonstrated in the dialogue with Thomas (Piraud, 2009). He was a high school sophomore in a science curriculum who was also involved in amateur cycling. He had been training for many years imagining that one day he would be wearing the yellow jersey on the Tour de France podium: Through the process of dual reflexivity he identified with the victorious figure of a Tour de France champion. Such identification led him to engage in an intense physical activity in order to prepare for this career. Thomas was seeing the counsellor having realized that despite enormous effort he would never attain this dream.

The beginning of the dialogue focused on the question of knowing how to announce this conclusion to his coach who, according to Thomas, treated him like his own son. Later, Thomas produced a whole series of interpretants, i.e. visions of possible future that allowed him to arrange events that marked his experience in the past in different ways. Each time Thomas selected, reflected on and articulated certain experiences of his life in a special way. This translated into emergence and consideration of potential anticipated subjective identity forms (= interpretants of different selected sets of life experiences arranged, each time, in a specific way): professional football player, army officer, sports coach, physiotherapist and dietitian for athletes. However, none of these perspective

futures seemed to be sufficiently attractive for Thomas to get involved into making it true... Finally, two years after the first meeting with the counsellor, Thomas passed the tests giving him access to a French police service (a branch of armed forces: *la Gendarmerie*), the employment that, according to his 'intimate' representation (Guichard, 2007, 2011) of this work (i.e. according to the personal feeling he attributed to the work of a "gendarme"), corresponded to his desire for order, his interest in sports and his concern for others.

Some clients can also find it difficult to formulate a perspective that would seem to them sufficiently significant and desirable for them to be able to invest in it. In Thomas' case, it seemed as if he could not identify with the figure corresponding with each of the anticipated SIF that he produced, while Hamza immediately 'saw' himself in the one of a doctor. This difference between Hamza and Thomas could be explained as follows. For Hamza, seeing himself in the figure of a doctor corresponded with his father's saying, "I could well see you as a doctor". It was an expression that Hamza could not recognize as justified before he heard himself saying it during the life design dialogue "Here! I see myself as a doctor!" – the process of immediate identification that followed the synthesis "Here you are... Being useful to others". Hamza described the process as follows: "When we speak about helping others, the doctor... fits! Treating people is the first thing that comes to mind... I think?". For Hamza it provided confirmation because this idea, seeing self as such, corresponded perfectly with the image of himself held by someone important for him. For Thomas, the situation was very much different. On the one hand, he needed to grieve over the vision of himself that someone important for him had (his coach who saw him as a gifted son who would become a champion cyclist). On the other hand, all the anticipated SIF that Thomas managed to construct were challenged by people who counted the most for him (his mother, sister, brother-in-law): "No, I don't see you doing that". It was especially his mother who opposed the SIF that he anticipated most: "An army officer! I only have one son and I don't want him to get killed".

These observations indicate that dual reflexivity, i.e. constituting the way of relating to self from the point of view of an ideal of self that the person wants to attain, can easily take precedence over trine reflexivity if such ideal is justified by significant others. In other words, the recognition – by significant others – of one's own recognition of self (i.e. its validation) is fundamental for constructing perspectives by which one gives meaning to one's life. Such recognition of the self-recognition – which validates it – seems to be a special form of what Claude Dubar called relational transaction. The significance of this phenomenon is emphasised by researchers who focus on the process of involvement of some western youth with ISIS (Islamic State, or similar organizations), where the validation of the perspective comes from strangers or quasi strangers, most often met through social networks, who soon become "friends – trusted persons". Whether such recognition of the perspective of self-realization by significant

others takes place or not within the life design dialogue, the experiments with such interventions show that they always trigger reflexive processes that generate expectations by means of which the client intends to bring meaning to their life (Savickas, Guichard, 2016a).

### **3. Methodology of the life design dialogue (LDD)**

The following paragraphs present a formula of a life design dialogue. After recalling its objective and four big questions that the client is asked, we specify the sub-objectives and the methodology for attaining each of them. In this presentation we describe the logic underpinning such dialogue – the logic that the counsellor facilitating the dialogue should have in mind. However, the actual dialogue can take different turns, with the counsellor always following the associations made by the client.

As we have already mentioned, life design dialogues (LDD) aim to help people define their future perspectives – not necessarily pertaining to professional career – that will make their active life meaningful and will help them get involved in implementing these perspectives. They have a form of counselling meetings between the client and the counsellor who meet three or four times within a period of two to six weeks. They are organized around four big questions asked to the client:

1. To what questions do you wish to find answers? To what problems do you wish to find solutions? How are we going to go about bringing these answers?
2. Which domains of life and experiences (present, past or hoped for and feared in the future) hold (have held or could hold) an important place in your life?
3. Choose one of these particularly important domains. Speak about what seems to you to be important about it... Then about the second... About the third... What themes – linked to some expectations concerning your future – are pictured in the recurrent words or phrases, etc. that you have used, and the emotions and feeling you have felt while telling the narrative?
4. What are you going to do now to make these expectations a reality?

#### **3.1 First interview (constructing working alliance)**

The objectives of the first interview are:

- To allow the client to formulate fundamental questions on which they wish to reflect.

- To offer to them the possibility to engage in a LDD after having explained the LDD methodology (in case such dialogue seems to fit in with their request).
- To agree to engage in a LDD or follow another counselling method (e.g. competencies elicitation device, guidance based on test results, etc.)

The interviewing proceeds as follows:

- The counsellor engages in dialogue by asking one question (borrowed from Mark Savickas):
  - » “How can I be useful to you?”
- Then, the counsellor conducts a dialogue with the client, in order to help them formulate questions that are important to them. The first questions that are expressed are rarely those that matter most. In order to help the client to articulate their request, the counsellor uses non-directive or semi-directive interviewing techniques: repetitions, echoing, mirroring, asking for clarifications, rephrasing, syntheses, specific questions, etc.
- If the main expectation of the client is to become aware of or specify their major hopes that could now give meaning to their life, the counsellor suggests that they start the life design dialogue.
- The counsellor presents the method to the client:
  - » “It is a dialogue during which the client reflects on different aspects of their present situation (work, family, significant relationships, leisure time, etc.), on some experiences or events in the past that were important or that influenced them and on some of their expectations relating to the future.”
  - » “This reflection is the client’s job – the counsellor’s role is only to help them formulate questions, narrate their experiences and to find their own responses while telling the narrative. This reflection takes time, usually it is advisable to have three or four meetings spread over one month, more or less.”
- If the client and the counsellor agree to use the LDD method (which can be adapted to the client’s needs) the LDD is then organized according to:
  - » what was said while constructing of the working alliance,
  - » and what appears to be relevant and important to analyse, according to what the client says.
- In all other cases the counsellor suggests to the client to follow a different method in order to find answers to the questions that they formulated.

### **3.2 Second interview (domains and life experiences)**

The objective of the second interview is to help the client to detect events, domains and life experiences that mean a lot to them (or meant, or left a trace or which they would like to have impact on their future). The method is as follows:

- The counsellor generally engages in dialogue using the question:
  - » “In order to make it possible for you to see more clearly your major expectations relating to your future, I suggest that we start by reflecting on the domains of life, fields of activity, roles, experiences, events, etc. that mean a lot in your present life, or which were important for you and have marked you, or those that you would like to (or fear that they will) be important in your future: what domains of life, activities, roles, experiences, events – past, present or future – come to your mind?”
- The counsellor provides necessary explanation to make the question understandable. They use techniques of non-directive or semi-directive interviews (repetitions, echoing, mirroring, asking for clarification, paraphrasing, precise questions, etc) in order to allow the client to articulate the domains, fields, roles, experiences, events, etc., that they consider important.
- At the end of this first analysis, the counsellor can offer to make an inventory of the domains, fields, roles, experiences, events, etc. that the client considers important. The counsellor then discusses this synthesis with the client and corrects it according to the client’s remarks. Together, they select the domains, fields, roles, experiences, events, etc. that the client will analyse later.

### **3.3 Third interview: what expectations for the future emerge from the narratives of the experiences, domains, roles, events that marked your life?**

The third interview constitutes the core of the LDD. Its objective is to allow the client to sketch specific expectations for their future, based on the narratives about themselves during different important life experiences. The third interview includes three moments.

- The counsellor can introduce the first moment of the third interview by saying (for example):
  - » “Our objective now is to make explicit the main expectations revealed by your narratives relating to the domains, fields, roles, experiences, events, etc. that you consider important in your life. Which of them do you want to talk first?”

- » “What can you say about this domain of your life (about this role, event, experience, etc.)?”
- The counsellor then helps the client to formulate a story about themselves in relation to this experience, this domain, this role, etc. They can do it by using non-directive or semi-directive interview techniques (repetitions, mirroring, echoing, paraphrasing, asking for clarification, etc.) and/or asking them questions such as:
  - » What can you say about this domain, field, role, experience, event, etc. in relation to yourself? What does it bring to you? (brought? What would you like it to bring or fear that it will bring?) What benefits? What losses? What knowledge, skills or capacities? What gains? What relations? What resources? What characters it allowed you to admire or to reject? Why? What expectations? What fears?
- At the end of the first story, the counsellor can suggest a synthesis by underlining the assertions that seemed salient to them. The client and the counsellor then discuss this synthesis until they agree on the key points.

Generally speaking, the first meeting between the client and the counsellor ends at the end of the first moment of the third interview. The two moments that follow take place during the second meeting, several days or weeks afterwards.

- When the second moment of the third interview takes place during the second meeting, the counsellor introduces it by suggesting to the client to relate what happened during the previous meeting, what ideas came to their mind since and what exchanges with others they managed to have on the subject, etc. This exchange precedes the client’s telling a story about themselves in relation to the second domain, field, role, experience, event, etc. that they deem important:
  - » “Which domain of life, experiences, roles, etc. that you consider important would you now like to tell me about?”
  - » “What can you say about this domain of your life (role, event, experience, etc.) in relation to yourself?”
- The counsellor supports the client in making the second story in the same way as before. However, they also stimulate creation of associations (cognitive and emotional) and linking of the expressions from the second story with those expressed previously: what do they have in common? What common emotions do they bring? How do they differ? What results from such associations (e.g. a common theme or similar expectations?)
- The dialogue continues with a story about self within other domains, fields, roles, experiences, events, etc. that the client considers important, by following associations that come to their mind. This comes to an end when relating their different declarations (comparisons, distinctions,

assimilations, evocations, similar emotions, etc.) leads them to either detecting their common major expectations, aspirations or anticipated future events, or to exposing one (sometimes two) domains of life, field(s) of activity, role(s), life experience(s), etc. that is (are) for the client the object of fundamental expectations in self-actualisation.

The role of the counsellor varies depending on the clients. Some of them make the connections between their declarations on their own, connections that reveal their expectations or desires for self-actualisation. Others need the counsellor's support, who, if that is the case, has to regularly formulate and remind the client of the associations that can be made between what the client had said in different moments in their stories. Among the associations and connections, those that the client makes between past and present experiences (or more recent experiences) play a major role in the production of future perspectives. Consequently, the interventions of the counsellor in the dialogue should aim to stimulate the expression of such associations – and then their analysis – by the client.

The last moment of the third interview is to help the client to make the balance sheet of the future perspectives that they had sketched, abandoned, kept, specified, etc. during the two preceding moments, and then to specify them further. By recalling some of client's expressions, the formulation of questions and hypotheses of a synthesis, expressing surprise, etc. the counsellor helps to specify the expectations concerning the client's future that the client sketched or formulated, gradually, while constructing their stories. Sometimes, the counsellor has to suggest a hypothetical synthesis emphasising some aspects of the client's stories that seem to indicate some major expectations concerning their future (and/or the domains, fields, roles, experiences, etc. that are the object of such expectations on their part). In all cases, future perspectives that get specified in this way are discussed with the client. The counsellor suggests that the client reflects on them before their next meeting (which can take place, at the earliest, a few days later).

### **3.4 Fourth interview: what are you going to do now?**

The fourth stage of the client's reflection takes place during the last meeting with the counsellor. The objectives are then as follows:

- To take stock of the client's present major expectations concerning their life.
- To help them specify what they need to do in order to maximise their chances to fulfil their wishes.
- Ask themselves about the dialogue that comes to an end: does it address the essential requests of the client? If not – what else can be done?
- Finish the dialogue.

This last meeting includes three moments.

- The counsellor can introduce the first moment by asking an open question or a closed one:
  - » For example: “Have you thought about what we said at the end of our last meeting? Have you reflected on the expectations and the domains of your life that seem to be most important to you? How would you summarise the situation today?”
  - » Or: “At the end of our last meeting we started to take stock of the major expectations that emerged from your analysis of the domains of life, fields of activity, roles, experiences, events, etc. that you deemed important to you. During that dialogue we have noted that the following expectations appeared: (the counsellor recalls the key points of the final synthesis of the last meeting and the discussion that followed) Do you agree with this summary? How do you see the situation today?”
- In both cases the dialogue that commences aims to ensure that the client clearly formulates the wishes that are key to them (= which make their present life meaningful):
  - » Do they see themselves, in their imagination, performing these activities in the future? In this role? Living this dream? Are these wishes reinforced by people who mean a lot to them? If not, did the client try to persuade them as to the soundness of their wishes?
- During the second moment of the fourth interview, the counsellor suggests that the client examines their actual life from the point of view of fulfilling their fundamental wishes:
  - » What do they need to do to increase their chances of making them a reality? What actions do they need to undertake? How to proceed? What changes do they need to make in their present life? In what domain(s) of life or field(s) of activity? etc.
- This dialogue continues until some courses of action are specified by the client, the paths that they seem ready to follow.
- The last moment of the dialogue starts with coming back to the intervention that is coming to an end. The counsellor asks client the following questions:
  - » Did the dialogue that is about to finish respond to the questions that the client asked themselves? If any questions remain – how can they try to solve them? Is there a need for a more fine-tuned intervention? Which?
- The life design dialogue finishes with a conversation that puts an end to the relationship counsellor-client. The counsellor indicates to the client that their reflection led them to the present conclusion. This conclusion



is important to them today, but it will probably be reviewed later in their life. The client should then carry out a similar reflection, using internal dialogues or dialogues with their significant others, or, once again, with a counsellor.

## Conclusion

Summing up, the ‘ideal-typical’ life design dialogue is organized around four big phases presented in Table 1 (below).

Table 1: Four phases of the ideal-typical life design dialogue

Phase 1	Construction of the working alliance.
Phase 2	The client’s inventory of domains of life, experiences, roles, fields of activity (past, present or hoped for in the future) events, etc. that the client considers to (have played and) play an important role in their life.
Phase 3	Client’s narratives concerning “themselves during each of the different major experiences” that allow them to detect recurring elements in their stories and relationships between significant aspects and linking that point to a direction of sketched perspectives for the future that make their life meaningful.
Phase 4	Definition of actions to undertake, behaviour to implement and conclusion of the dialogue.

As we mentioned, the life design dialogues are an example of career and life design interventions that aim to help people to conceive of, construct and direct their active life. Contrary to the employability guidance interventions, these dialogues do not assume that people respond to the question of an active life that will make their existence meaningful by thinking in terms of fitting in present work organizations and work exchanges (but, of course, without excluding such a response). These dialogues were constructed through a synthesis of knowledge in the fields of humanities and social sciences pertaining to the process and factors involved in construction of the self. This synthesis describes subjective identity as a dynamic system of subjective identity forms (anchored in the system of subjective cognitive identity frames, itself integrated in the cognitive identity frames system in long-term memory). Moreover, it also considers people to play a role in the dynamics of this system through two forms of reflexivity: dual and trine. The latter, especially, is mobilised during the life design dialogue. Different studies – in particular those presented in the special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (Savickas, Guichard, 2016a) demonstrate that, on the one

hand, these interventions effectively address problems, expressed by individuals in modern liquid societies, relating to the direction they search to give their active life, and on the other hand, that they effectively fulfil their objective. We may, however, ask if the dialogues are sufficient to prepare people for contributing a solution to present serious global crises (relating mainly to the sustainability of our ecosystem, the deterioration of working conditions and significant increase in wealth inequalities).

*Translated from French by Katarzyna Byłów-Antkowiak*

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