

**Career Autobiography: Parts 1 & 2**

Ashley E. Gartner

Wake Forest University

CNS 743: Career Development and Counseling

Dr. Jeremy Goshorn; Ana Blesso

November 8, 2020

## **Career Autobiography: Parts 1 & 2**

My career development path has been more like an expert hiking trail, filled with unexpected twists and turns, winding switchbacks, and daunting obstacles. From an early age, it was never a question of whether I would go to college. My father is truly a self-made man. He was the firstborn in a family of blue-collar workers who never made it beyond high school and put himself through undergrad and dental school by working in the family business. He expected nothing less of his children (save putting ourselves through college) and never hid his expectations. My mother, a technical school graduate, approved of and supported these wishes. When discussions of future career plans would come up, getting there via university was always considered. He raised us to believe that if a high school diploma can get you one thing, a college degree will get you something better. Even when the topic was doing something within the arts, earning a degree to help you with the career's financial side was a given.

As far as career dreams are concerned, there are three things that I have always loved: music, the law, and helping people talk through their problems to come up with solutions. My personal experiences with abuse and seeing the lives laid out before my juvenile delinquent friends likely influenced the last two things, but I have always loved to sing. When I was little, most of my future plans involved me singing in a band, touring the country, and writing music that might make a difference in someone's life. My parents supported me as much as they could. They started me in piano lessons when I was 5-years-old. Violin happened for a couple of years in the elementary school orchestra before the school board shut it down due to a lack of funding. I was in the church choir, my town's children's choir, and even started vocal lessons when I was in junior high. I had everything going for me, save one thing: I was terrified to perform in front of people. Stage fright is not something that a lead singer in a popular touring band could have,

so I gave up on that dream. I still sing and write; I just do it for me now instead of everyone else, as a form of self-care.

In junior high, I discovered that I had an uncanny ability to get people to open up to me and talk with me about their problems. I also found that I had a streak running through me a mile long that demanded justice in unfair practices. I found that the school was labeling many of my friends as bad kids because they would act out in class or try getting attention somehow. What they did not do was try to find out why, and that perturbed me. So, I started kicking around the idea of going to school to be a juvenile justice advocate—the idea of becoming a therapist hit around the same time. At this point, I had been seeing a counselor for a few years for the emotional trauma that happened to me as a young child. After I changed therapists (from a crotchety old psychoanalyst to a client-centered style therapist), I found that what I had been doing a kind of therapy with people all along when they would start word-vomiting their life to me. I discovered that this was another, likely better way to help people like my friends. Both of these professional ideas stayed with me for years. After some career counseling and education (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017) with my guidance counselor at school, I knew to begin either career, I would need a background in psychology. So that is where I started my college career.

I officially started my career as a college student during my senior year in high school. I do not believe that distance learning was a possibility at IU 20 years ago, so I was allowed to leave on class days and drive to Bloomington to attend them in person. I did okay but quickly discovered that college classes were a lot harder than my high school ones had ever been. For the first time in 12 years, I failed a class. That summer, I moved out and began taking an “introduction to college” class before taking a full, 15-hour course load in the fall.

That fall, my world turned upside down. 9/11 happened, I had a bad, co-dependent relationship break up, I was away from my parents, I got med students' disease, and everything started falling apart. The tenuous hold that I had on my mental health started to slip, and I began to fail, at everything. Working with my therapist, I was able to get approval to pull out of all but two of my classes, and it was a struggle to keep up with them, but I ended the semester better than I would have otherwise GPA-wise and much better mental health-wise. After my experiences with med students' disease, I chose to fall back on my other love – the law. I changed my declared major from Psychology to Criminal Justice and started on the path of becoming an attorney. This change was, unfortunately, doomed to fail as well. Four years and a university-transfer later, I flunked out of the Indiana University system.

Knowing my dad's decree that all of his children would have college degrees, my aunt suggested that I look into culinary school because I had developed a love of cooking while living alone and had a ton of experience in food service, having worked in it since high school. So, I sought out some area schools, but decided that I needed a completely fresh start and moved to Louisville, Kentucky to attend Sullivan University. This change was a resounding success. I completed my associate's degree in culinary arts with a B average and returned home to get a job. As much as I loved culinary school, I hated working in a professional kitchen. I started losing weight, losing my hair, and losing my mind because of the stress. Knowing that school no longer had to be (or even was) an option, I started asking around to see what other jobs were available. Here is where I fell into my actual 8-year career.

I went into the office at my apartment complex and, having worked with them in the past, asked if they had any job openings. The consultant replied that they did not, but a sister-property was looking for a full-time leasing consultant. I immediately drove across town to fill out an

application and set up a time for the interview. They hired me, and I spent the next two years as a full-time consultant, at which point my manager unceremoniously promoted me to the assistant property manager at her second property. After two years in that position and essentially running the property by myself because my manager was rarely there, the Vice President of Operations practically bullied me into applying for the property management position that had recently come available, knowing that I was ready for it. Of course, I put in for it, got the job, and started running a property of my own. Over the next three years, I participated in many career development programs (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017), such as continuing education seminars, two certification courses, and a 6-week leadership class. The VP of Operations and my regional manager were even grooming me to take over her position when she retired. I was reasonably confident that I would stay with the company until I retired myself.

Then the bottom dropped out...again. Our President and CEO decided that he wanted to retire. The man that the board brought in to replace him was an egotistical nightmare who did not like me from the get-go. So, when the inevitable downsizing started, I was let go with the little voice in my head as my only warning. Ironically, it was around this time that I had looked into going back to school to finish my psychology degree. I felt for some time that I needed to go back and finish my degree and, only weeks before they fired me, I began the process of getting back in IU. Classes started the following Monday, so I went back to school and got a part-time job working as the office manager in a luxury jewelry store. Two years later, I graduated with Indiana University Bachelor's degree in Psychology and came to Wake Forest to complete my Masters in Counseling and attain my dream of helping those kids, like my friends, who get labeled as bad kids because they act out when they suffer from abuse and neglect at home.

### **Career Development Analysis**

I am choosing Lent, Brown, and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Chaos Theory of Careers to analyze my career development. My unending belief that I can do anything that I put my mind to can be explained by SCCT. I may not enjoy it once I am there, but I can at least say that I tried and learned from it. SCCT can be explicitly applied to my story in my persistence to overcome obstacles. As a woman who continues to choose jobs in careers dominated by men, I have come across my fair share of gender-based barriers; some I have broken through, others were not worth the hassle.

The best example of this is when I started working in the culinary business. The best chefs in the world are all men, as are most of the cooks in my hometown, so the first barrier is getting used to the vulgarity and innuendo in the kitchen. If you cannot make it past that, you will not make it in the restaurant business. Another barrier that I have had to overcome was breaking the glass ceiling (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017) when I became a property manager. I broke through because of my performance, abilities, and persistence; all concepts emphasized in SCCT (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017). I carry the lessons (positive and negative) that I learned every place I have worked and allow them to build my self-efficacy.

As Chaos Theory emphasizes, my story has been extraordinarily non-linear, and so many of my career deviations have been due to unplanned events (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017). Starting my career as a leasing consultant, working in a restaurant that made me hate restaurants, becoming the property manager of the property I ran for two years instead of the one I applied for, getting a job in the jewelry store, and becoming its office manager; all of these things were utterly unplanned (at least by me), and all lead me to a better place in my life. I am unsure where this next chapter of my life will bring, but I cannot wait to find out!

### References

Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. (2017). *Career Development Interventions* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson.