10.20856/jnicec.4502

Exploring processes of change in a life-design career development intervention in socio-economically challenged youth

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Previous research has sought to identify the underlying processes and mechanisms that lead to lasting changes in a client's career development, yet more research needed to understand what elicits effective changes. The present research will explore how life-design career counselling supports change in a group of disadvantaged South African adolescents. The present research study will focus on a post-intervention qualitative strand, which included evaluative worksheets completed post-intervention (n = 265) and a focus data six months later (n = 6). Braun and Clarke's (2006) content analysis was used to group themes according to the Career Construction Theory (CCT) and process constructs of narrative career counselling. Qualitative findings provide evidence that the intervention had elicited long-term changes in career development and facilitated reflective processes. Implications and recommendations for research and practice will be discussed.

Introduction

South Africa, like many other nations, faces multiple challenges in creating work opportunities and reducing unemployment (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Contextual factors, such as unemployment, a weak national economy and shifting entry requirements into occupations, constantly impact South African individuals and make career development processes inherently complex (Stead & Watson, 2017). South African youth (aged 15 to 34) are especially vulnerable in the labour market, with an unemployment rate of 63.4 % (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Approximately 56.4% of the 10.3 million South African youth (aged 15 to 24 years) are reported not to be in employment, education or training (Statistics South Africa, 2019). However, career interventions can support youth to exit transcend poverty as a long-term objective and can yield positive short-term effects on grades attained, school attendance, tertiary education enrolment and employment outcomes (Perry & Smith, 2017; Tripney & Hombrados, 2013). A call has been made for unique career techniques that are applicable to specific locations, times and spaces, such as that of Kayamandi (where this study was conducted), to address the subjective and personal meanings ascribed to career choices (Maree, 2010).

The present research study took place in the peri-urban informal settlement called Kayamandi Township. It is situated on the slopes of the Papegaaiberg and the edges of the northern outskirts of the Stellenbosch Cape Winelands district (co-ordinates 33.9183° S, 18.8448° E) about 50 km from Cape Town. During Apartheid, Kayamandi was a settlement for Black migrant farm workers. Due to continued migration rates the township continued to increase size and there is still ongoing migration from the Eastern Cape in the search of better career opportunities. The Kayamandi context is characterised by high levels of unemployment, rising crime rates, lack of adequate housing structures and sanitation, gang-related activity, substance abuse and scarce low skilled occupations. In order to address these complex issues in diverse cultural environments, the postmodern career counselling approach has been advocated by Maree and colleagues (2006) in a South African context. Therefore, the present research aims to assess whether a Life-design career intervention elicited any long-term

changes in career development and reflective processes by exploring process constructs of change.

Theoretical overview

Career counsellors employing post-modern career counselling approaches use story-telling or narrative approaches that apply communication microskills, which are also utilised in therapeutic counselling (E.g., Egan, 2009). Savickas (1993, p. 212) claims that a "career is personal" and individuals can unearth subjective career realities through the telling of their own stories (McMahon & Patton, 2002). Previous studies in a South African context have shown that Life-design counselling helps clients to use their lived-experiences and narratives to develop an inner stability that is needed to overcome career-related uncertainty and barriers, as well as remain hopeful and employable (Maree, 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

The Life-design counselling model (Savickas et al., 2009) is informed by, and at the same time actualises, the self-construction theory (SCT) (Guichard, Pouyaud, De Calan, & Dumora, 2012) and the career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2011a). The SCT views people as proactive agents who use prospective reflexivity to construct versions of themselves in their life domains at given time points to negotiate transitions and personal experiences (Guichard & Lenz, 2005; Mahoney, 2002). The identification of central different selves, known as subjective identity forms (SIFs) are tied to a career-life choice and resulting in an action plan (Guichard et al., 2012; Savickas, 2015a).

The CCT was used in the present research as a theoretical framework to facilitate understanding of an individual's vocational personality (who he/she is), career adaptability (how to adapt) and life themes (what work roles are valued) in an individual's narratives (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012a, 2012b). According to Savickas (2013a, 2013b), there are four proposed dimensions of 'adapt-abilities'. The first dimension is *concern*, which involves a future orientation, whereas *control* refers to self-regulation and responsibility for career decisions. In contrast, *curiosity* describes career exploration activities and *confidence* refers to self-efficacy and the ability beliefs that an individual holds.

The versatility and applicability of the life-design model has been critiqued by Watson (2013), due to the lack of choice faced by many individuals in their career trajectories. As a result, research has been conducted across diverse settings, that include developed and developing country contexts with individual and group formats to assess the suitability of the life-design model (Maree, 2016, 2017). Thus far, research studies have determined the applicability of the CCT to population groups which had non-normative career paths or multiple transitions because career adaptability dimensions were deemed flexible enough to be assessed quantitatively and qualitatively (McMahon, Watson, & Bimrose, 2012a). Therefore, the present research adds to the existing research base on the applicability of the life designing approach to non-western and non-European contexts.

The successful designing of career-lives entails reflexive construction, deconstruction, co-construction (i.e., collaboration between client and counsellor), and reconstruction of a career- life story (Savickas, 2011b). There are three broad phases (Savickas, 2015b) namely: 1) encouraging clients to tell small stories (constructions); 2) reconstruction of small stories into larger stories; and 3) co-construction of future stories. In practice, career counsellors require skills to facilitate the recursive process constructs of connectedness, reflection, meaning-making, learning and agency to help clients actualise their identities (McMahon, 2005). *Connectedness* refers to attachment or belonging to familial, communal or spiritual domains (i.e., a common humanity termed "Ubuntu" in the African context (Mkhize, 2011), which influences identity construction, well-being and personal resources. *Reflection* refers to a thought process from a starting point of doubt or conflict to culminating in a different view of a situation (McMahon, Watson, Chetty, & Hoelson, 2012b). *Meaning-making* refers to individuals' understandings, and insights into their coexistence in action and context (Chen, 2011), facilitated by the identification of life themes or patterns that connect life stories into a coherent narrative. *Learning* refers to a recursive process that moves between action, reflection, thought processes, planning and new action sequences (Hawkins & Shohet, 2000) based on new understandings or knowledge gained to allow new planning and enactment of those career plans. *Agency* refers to a client's personal

initiative, responsibility or ownership of a personal narrative to take the necessary steps to combine action and intention in a career trajectory (Young & Domene, 2011).

Goals of the study

The present research explores the process constructs of change with life-designing theoretical underpinnings in a group of disadvantaged South African adolescents to assess whether a career intervention any elicited long-term changes in career development and reflective processes.

Methods

Research design

The present research study will focus on a qualitative strand post-intervention of a mixed-methods intervention study (Albien, in press). This qualitative data included evaluative worksheets completed by the participants post-intervention (n = 265) and a focus group data six months later (n = 6). Evaluative worksheets included reflective questions that allowed an exploration of the participants' subjective career development changes after an intervention, which were further explored using a focus group interview. The interview schedule was adapted from the reflective questions posed in the *Shaping Career Voices Intervention Booklet* (for more information on the group career intervention please see Albien (2019), as well as from feedback questions which assessed the value that participants attached to the career intervention.

Participants

In the qualitative phase of the study, post-intervention written reflections and intervention feedback were collected from all the participants at T4 (n = 265) to determine if the career intervention had elicited processes of change. However, only the participants who exhibited the highest changes in scores were selected, and a content analysis was conducted on 47 evaluation and reflective worksheets. In the sample of 47 Black township high school learners, the age range was between 15 and 20 years old (M = 17, SD = 1.15). The participants consisted of 12 (26%) males and 35 (74%) females. In the focus group, a sample of six participants (5 girls and one boy) between the ages of 17 and 20 years old (M = 18, SD = 1.25) was selected to be interviewed based on a significant increase in scores post-intervention.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the research and publish the findings was obtained from the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee, Western Cape Education Department, the participating schools, the learners and their parents. Anonymity and confidentiality of all participants was ensured. isiXhosa translators were present whilst the qualitative worksheets were completed in English guided by bilingual explanations, after the translations were deemed confusing in the articulation of career counselling constructs.

Data analysis

NVivo Qualitative Research Software (Version 11) was used to facilitate Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps of a thematic analysis of narrative themes based on the CCT framework (Savickas, 1997, 2005) and process constructs of narrative career counselling (McMahon et al., 2012b). An immersion in the data occurred, whereafter initial codes were generated for important sections of the transcribed text. The relevant coded data was then sorted into themes using the *CCT dimensions* (i.e., concern, confidence, control, curiosity and co-operation) as a coding schedule. The data was also coded according to the *narrative process construct dimensions* (i.e., reflection, connectedness, meaning-making, learning and agency). Research assistants transcribed, captured, and performed the initial data coding, which was reviewed with inter-rater reliability checks until themes were redefined and renamed and supported by verbatim extracts.

Results and discussion

The present research results contribute to the limited base of evidence for the effectiveness of the life-designing approach in a group format an in a non-western and non-European context. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006) allowed extracted themes to be grouped according to CCT and process construct dimensions, as seen below.

Theme	Sub-theme	CCT	Process constructs
1. Elimination of negative influences	1.1 Negotiating the community Gaze	Co-operation	Agency
	1.2 Decreased self-doubt	Control	Meaning-making
2. Acceptance of alternative career identities	2.1 New career opportunities	Curiosity	Learning
	2.2 Increased career flexibility	Confidence	Learning
3. Need for co-operation	3.1 Need for an accessible mentor	Co-operation	Connectedness
	3.2 Family as a support system	Co-operation	Connectedness
4. Increased self-reflection	4.1 Integration of personal variables in career choices	Curiosity	Reflection
	4.2 Linking the past, present and future	Concern	Meaning-making

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes grouped according to CCT and process constructs

The extracted themes indicated that the participants received the *Shaping Career Voices Intervention* positively, and that the intervention facilitated career development processes that lasted up to six months after the intervention. There were four themes and each of these themes were linked to change process constructs in order to assess underlying processes of change elicited by the intervention. However, only long-term follow-up studies would be able to assess if these intentions were successfully carried out or if the participants wavered in their perseverance when faced with collective needs (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004).

The first theme was *elimination of negative influences*, which included: 1) *negotiating the community gaze*, and 2) *decreased self-doubt*. These two sub-themes were grouped under the process constructs of agency and meaning-making. The first sub-theme had to do with the pressure that the community itself placed on the participants. Community members were seen to 'make you doubt yourself' (P.201), 'make you think it is not possible' (P.246), and 'ask you why you think you are so special that you will succeed where others have failed?' (P.74). Due to this negative gaze, individuals would mislead community members until they had achieved a visible measure of success, which then would prove to them and the others around them that they were making their dreams become a reality. Therefore, there was a constant tension between showing off the materialistic indicators of success that were achieved as self-worth markers (Swartz, 2011) to be viewed as 'somebody' (P.39) and hiding failures or endeavours that had not yet led to fruition in order to prevent someone from 'stealing your success' (P.27).

The second sub-theme of *decreased self-doubt* was an interesting finding because increased uncertainty could be linked to an active engagement with a future time perspective. As a result, participants felt more at ease with the uncertainty involved in career exploration processes and viewed career-life planning as a continuous process (Maree, 2017). Participants used the following phrases to describe their decreased self-doubt: 'You know or have faith that you will make it happen if you take the right steps' (P.239), 'I don't doubt myself anymore, I think I need to ask, learn and keep moving to get there' (P.176), 'that voice that told me you can't, I have learnt to talk back to it and say with no doubt I can' (P.185), and 'my self-doubt caused me to stop moving, I can't allow fear to do that to me' (P.90).

The second theme was the *acceptance of alternative career identities*. Within this theme there were two sub-themes: 1) *new career opportunities*, and 2) *increased career flexibility.* These sub-themes were linked to the process construct of learning, whereby new knowledge

was included in participants' narratives and their career behaviours changed. In the first sub-theme, the participants visibly expanded their range of career options, by mentioning new careers that they still wanted to examine. The participants said: 'There are so many bursaries for different careers, now I must look which one fits to me' (P.10), 'I now get excited to look at what career I will have one day – what sort of person will I become?' (P.70), 'my family did not have these options, so now I need to be brave enough to dive in and explore' (P.69), and 'yes it's scary, but it's like hunting for treasure, you can't give up quick' (P.40).

The final sub-theme was *increased career flexibility*, and here participants had shifted from their initial ideas of 'sticking to a career' to acknowledge how many career changes people around them had undergone and the need to be flexible. The participants had shifted their ideas from a fixed career informing their SIF to an idea of success that could be reached in multiple ways following different career paths. An increased commitment was seen to making a success of themselves, regardless if 'I may start in one career and then land up somewhere else and that is ok, I have made peace with that' (P.159) and 'I am more open to changes in my career ideas' (P.175) and 'If I am open to new career ideas I may find something would never have found otherwise' (P.129).

The third theme was the *need for co-operation,* which included: 1) *the need for accessible mentors* and 2) *family as a support system*. These sub-themes show the process construct of connectedness. The first sub-theme of *the need for accessible mentors* was a significant change that emerged from the intervention with the presence of visible role models (i.e., Fieldworkers). The participants explained that they now understood 'how important it is to have someone to share your career ideas with to gain another point of view' (P.91), 'it needs to be someone who understands the struggle' (P.76) and 'has tips for you how to get to your dream' (P.120). This was a significant change from the deception that was emphasised in theme one, and participants now invested energy in developing trusted social networks that could facilitate their career development (Maree 2015a, 2015b; Savickas 2011a, 2011c).

Secondly, the sub-theme of *family as a support system* was in line with ubuntu cultural underpinnings (Kamwangamulu, 1999; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Participants had been socialised into a collective self-hood, where these individuals are expected to: 'respect and take care of the elders' (P.6), 'take their parents and family's advice and apply it' (P.91), 'not to embarrass the family name' (P.2), 'not waste time trying to learn something, find something that you can do' (P.1). However, this family critique had to be managed in order to find a sense of self that was embedded in the collective self-hood. After the intervention a shift was noticed where family members proved supportive if career ideas were openly discussed. Participants mentioned that 'so now they see I am busy making future plans and they say they will do whatever they can to help me' (P.178), 'you know they really changed towards me, they became so supportive when they saw I am making an effort' (P.99), 'they now share any information they hear about with me' (P.50), and 'it has really opened channels of communication in my family' (P.119).

The fourth theme was *increased self-reflection* and included: 1) *integration of personal variables in career choices*, and 2) l*inking the past, present and future*. These sub-themes can be linked to the process constructs of reflection and meaning-making. The first sub-theme included a deeper look inward, as participants had previously not spent time 'listening to my inner voice – what is it that I want?' (P.87) and also had not 'considered what I am actually good at and how this links to a career choice' (P.97). The notion that a career was separate from what the participants enjoyed or were good at was a shared idea, where 'a career is a means to an end' and 'a way to pay the bills' (P.101). Participants mentioned that they had never before considered that they 'had a unique set of skills' (P.46). Instead, 'everyone in the community is seen as the same' (P.129) and that they now 'spent time to think about what values, skills and personality traits they want to match with a career' (P.87). This is a significant change elicited by the intervention. During the intervention, emphasis was placed on work environments and personal traits matching or not matching, as well as the consequences of a mismatch (Dawis, 1996; Dawis & Lofquist, 1976; Swanson & Schneider, 2013).

The last sub-theme of *linking the past, present and future* indicated that a future time perspective had been developed. Participants were now actively linking

previous success experiences as vicarious examples of mastery to draw on in the face of career uncertainty and anxiety to work towards a clear SIF. The following comments were made: 'I used to spend so much time in the now, not thinking what has shaped me, not looking forward, now that has changed' (P.145), 'I learnt to join the dots in my story and I need to keep linking the past, present and future events to make a complete story' (P.26), 'The present is not enough, I need to link what I do today to create a different tomorrow' (P.14) and 'At first I didn't understand, how the past influences the present which determines the future, but now I do and it has changed my life' (P.151).

Patterns of change: Integrating process constructs

Participants indicated that the intervention had facilitated changes in their career planning and exploration approaches using connectedness, learning, reflection, meaning-making and agency. They stated that they projected themselves more into the future, perceived fewer career barriers, and were better at making their intentions result in career behaviors (Soresi, Nota, & Ferrari, 2012). There was an increased awareness of their connectedness or social embeddedness as well as how this may have limited their previous career exploration due to collectivistic obligations. A tension was reflected between acknowledging the need for co-operation to gain detailed career information, and guarding fragile career dreams from people in the community who were likely to reinforce self-doubt or fear of failure. As a result, the participants reported increased agency in the form of self-efficacy, self-worth and personal responsibility for being the authors of their own work-in-progress stories. In addition, there was better integration of past, present and future behaviours, as well as insight into personal variables that had shaped their career decision-making processes, which can be ascribed to their meaning-making processes. At six-months post-intervention, the feedback remained consistent, which indicated the effectiveness and the staying power of the intervention.

Implications for local and global career counselling practices

The focus on a low-income population group is a limitation of the present research, and, as a result, the data obtained represents only a small segment of the heterogeneous South African population. Although, explanations in isiXhosa and English were added throughout the research process, there is always a danger that nuances may not have been captured in English, as they would have been in isiXhosa. Future research is needed to assess the applicability and efficacy of the CCT and process of change constructs across socio-economic milieus in South African as well as other marginalised adolescent population groups worldwide.

Although these career decision-making difficulties amongst youth are a shared world-wide phenomenon, lessons can be learnt from the current research study. Western or developed world contexts are facing new issues of diversity and multiculturalism as never before due to increasing numbers of displaced and migratory population groups. Therefore, research conducted in multi-cultural contexts, such as South Africa, may prove extremely beneficial in providing examples of life-designing career counselling approaches to guide vocational decision-making processes. Specifically, career counsellors need to consider how they best can play a facilitative role by including process constructs of meaning-making, learning and connectedness between past and present, as well as including the client's personal, communal and social context. These process of change constructs need to be included in career counselling sessions, whilst targeting CCT dimensions, to facilitate change and act as qualitative change indicators to assess whether career interventions were effective.

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Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the South African National Research Foundation Innovation Scholarship (Grant number: AEMD160619172334) and Stellenbosch University Postgraduate Merit Bursary. Thank you to all the participants and fieldworkers that took part, as well as Prof. A.V. Naidoo for his supervision.

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