

Career counselling with life design in a collectivist cultural context: An action research study

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Large-scale macro forces are restructuring forms of work in urban India creating the need for alternative methods of career counselling. This research explores the application of a US-based approach to constructing careers i.e. Life-Design Career Counseling (i.e., LDC) with two mid-career professionals in India. Data consisted of client responses to different narrative career counselling exercises such as a lifeline activity, a career construction interview and semi-structured feedback interviews. Action research's focus on reflexivity helped integrate theory with practice to contribute to knowledge production and meaningful innovations within practice. Findings from this research underscored the importance of relationship, reflection and sense-making and the need for India to utilise a culturally resonant career intervention. The study holds value for career professionals, in India and beyond where LDC is still unexplored. Moreover, LDC practitioners in non-Western countries and collectivist societies will benefit from a contextual adaptation that encourages focus on client learning.



Introduction

Traditionally, India is a collectivist society. Whilst globalization and technology are restructuring urban India's career outlook, there exist deeply rooted beliefs that could prevent its populace from flourishing within this dynamic context. Gideon Arulmani's research provides insights into career guidance in the Indian context. It illustrates Indian adolescents' lack of awareness regarding self and the world of work,

and the strong influence of perceptions regarding prestige and status on career development (Arulmani & Nag, 2006). These career beliefs are passed on from parents, family and community traditions leading to an age-old belief system wherein the focus for many Indians becomes obtaining qualifications and employment rather than lifelong learning and building career resilience (Mehta, 2013; Ubba, 2016). Career counselling in India is unstructured and dominated by private provision from organizations and individuals. The approach to counselling is predominantly psychometric and prescriptive in orientation, with a focus on information provision and subject selection (Arulmani, 2007). It is rooted in the ancient Indian tradition wherein the counsellor (or religious head in the past) is seen as a guide, and the client with family, expect to be 'told' about the best career (Arulmani, 2011a).

Career development theories designed to inform practice have largely been developed in western contexts and may have limited applicability in India (Arulmani 2011a, b; Arulmani & Nag, 2006). Indian career counselling is still largely about matching and constructivist techniques are yet to be explored extensively. Some attempts have been made by Bakshi and Satish (2015) and Arulmani's (2011a) 'Jiva' approach which combines contemporary career concepts with Indian epistemology and culture. Encouraging the 'cultural preparedness' approach, Arulmani (2011b) acknowledges that career development occurs under the influence of a wide range of factors. Family, social structure, economic climate, and political orientations, together create an environment in which attitudes and opinions are formed about occupations and career. Career interventions need to attend to all of these factors if they are to be effective. The aim of this

action-research study is to explore the application of the US-originated Life Design Counselling to this Indian collectivist context to determine its suitability for future integration.

Theoretical Overview

Life Design Counselling (LDC) has been developed for the 21st century occupational landscape, commonly described as 'VUCA' - volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (Savickas, 2015b). Advanced through a multinational collaboration, the LDC framework implements theories of self-construction (Guichard, 2005) and career construction (Savickas, 2005). LDC's administration has been explored within diverse client groups (varied age groups, clients with disabilities and marginalized sections of society) from Western countries. There are a few studies that examine the effectiveness of LCD and Maree (2013) is one example of the exploration of its diversity. Tien (2015) discusses multicultural issues in LDC with application to the generalised Eastern context and the research presented here further adds to the subject by highlighting nuanced realities that define Indian culture. Tien makes pertinent points about gender, drawing attention to the relevance of Indian society's patriarchal outlook where often families wish for a son to propagate their business and perpetuate their pre-conceived professional legacy. For example, engineers and lawyers 'inherit' their careers from fathers/ grandfathers or family businesses are expected to be inherited and expanded. This outlook adds to the societal pressure on Indian adolescent boys and also on girls that belong to families without male progeny. Following a consideration of these cultural factors, we now will discuss the Life-Design Counselling framework in more detail.

The Life-Design Counselling (LDC) framework comprises of the Career Construction Interview (CCI), designed to elicit a client's life story as a series of micro-stories. These are later consolidated by the client and counsellor to co-create a psychological life-portrait that provides an autobiographical narrative of the client's central life-theme. The life-portrait is then used to prompt the client to move intentionally towards enacting self in life/career. LDC's aim is to increase clients' adaptability, narratability, intentionality

and reflexivity. Achievement of these goals help clients thrive within their changing environment, articulate their life-career story in their own language, purposefully shape their life-career story and increase their contemplative awareness and understanding about their own lives and career development (Hartung & Vess, 2016).

Life-Design Counseling has been criticised for its lack of orientation towards social justice and career learning (Patton & Watson, 2015). Watson (2013) has critically examined core tenets of Career Construction Theory and their relevance for non-western and developing contexts. He recommends practitioners to theoretically adapt to contexts where: the clients' cultural frame of reference is collectivistic; the language used has different connotations; and career oppressive contexts challenge the meaning of constructing a self within the work role. These aspects, along with Arulmani's recommendations for a cultural preparedness approach, have been addressed via theoretical triangulation elsewhere (Bhalla, 2019), but are beyond the scope of this article.

The present study implemented a hybrid approach to Life-Design Counseling by combining CCI with a lifeline. This activity retains focus on the client while facilitating in-depth self-reflection. Visually, it is helpful in mapping the occupational plot (Savickas, 2011) and identifying the client's life-theme. The use of appropriate questioning further aids the understanding of the client's salient life-roles.

Research Methodology

The research questions were derived from the aim and purpose of the study and framed to follow the Action Research (AR) cycle of plan-act-review-to plan again. These are:

- (RQ1):** How can I conduct a successful LDC intervention with mid-career professionals in India?
- (RQ2):** What are the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention?
- (RQ3):** What are the recommendations for my services?

Sampling/ Participants

Data collection consisted of audio recorded interviews with clients, real-time notes made during the CCI and observations recorded in an electronic reflective journal. The participants were recruited via email from the counsellor's existing client network in India. As a result, four candidates responded. However due to time constraints only two candidates were able to participate in the research. Although the sample was only a small number, rich insights were yielded from feedback interviews consisting of a pre-determined set of open-ended questions. Whilst a larger sample would be needed to ensure data saturation, the depth of insights from the small number of participants was deemed appropriate given the clear constructivist epistemological position of both the research project and the LDC framework itself.

In order to respect the rights and dignity of research subjects, pseudonyms have been used to refer to clients and any other identifying text has been altered. Jane (female 24 years old) was managing her forty-year old family-owned retail business of sports equipment. She was contemplating an international Masters and seeking clarity whether she should pursue what she is 'good at professionally' or what she 'enjoyed personally'. She identified Sports Management as an ideal career path because she loved sports and enjoyed leadership but wanted reaffirmation. Personally, Jane enjoyed creative writing, but considered it too subjective and a risk professionally. She was one of three daughters living in a multi-generational extended family unit which was strict and conservative. They (especially her father) believed in the dignity of self-employment and she was influenced by this view.

Drew (male 25 years old) was a culinary professional who had recently left his job at a renowned coffee-chain as head-chef due to dissatisfaction with the environment and supervisor. Drew had a history of not enjoying studies unless they 'made sense, were logical and had practical application'. During school and college, he left his studies midway because he did not see merit in what was being taught. Drew had recently attended his sister's graduation at a prestigious institution in Spain and was doubtful whether he should pursue the same MBA, because as he stated in the interview 'Drew and studies don't go together'.

Procedure

The following four steps were conducted over two client meetings and constituted the response to RQ1.

1. Introduction to the nature and purpose of this study followed by the opening question of CCI (see Table 1 below).
2. Lifeline activity to ascertain the life-theme from client's life story. Significant positive and negative career/ life events were plotted on a line graph. Subsequently, the remainder of the CCI was conducted.
3. In the time between the first and second meetings, the life-portrait was constructed using a staged process (Maree, 2013; Savickas, 2011; 2015a, b).
4. The second session was initiated with the question - 'Has anything become clearer to you since our last meeting?'. Thereafter, the life-portrait was discussed and any beliefs that needed to be redressed were negotiated. After confirming achievement of mutually agreed counselling goals, each client wrote a mission statement or success formula. The intervention was concluded by conducting a semi-structured feedback interview.

To address RQ2, the data was explored to assess the strengths and weaknesses of LDC with Indian clients. In RQ3, the inferences drawn from the first two questions were examined to make recommendations for practice. After completion of all three stages with the first client, the entire cycle was repeated for the second client. The counsellor utilized multiple frameworks for evaluation (see Table 2. below). This article is limited to the use of the triadic lens, which comprises of LDC's core elements in order to summarize evaluation and to make recommendations for practice.

For assessment of CCI responses, Savickas (2011) advocates identifying the client's script from their favourite story, to learn which cultural tales clients reproduce. Clients adopt these scripts from the master narrative their communities provide, and knowing a culture means knowing its standard stories. The lead author's knowledge of the client and

Table 1. Career Construction Interview Content

QUESTION	PURPOSE
How can I be useful to you through this session?	Elicit counselling goals to set the scene
Who did you admire when you were growing up? List three heroes / role-models.	Character traits portray the self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What attracts you to your favourite magazines or television shows? b. Favourite subjects c. Favourite subjects d. Hobbies 	Indicated manifest interests/settings and preferred work stages to enact self
What is your current favourite story?	Storyline provides a script for linking self to setting
Tell me your favourite saying or motto?	Self-advice offers support strategies and solution for constructing next episode in the story
What is your earliest recollection?	Early memories give perspective on current problem

Table 2. Details of the Interpretive Framework

Analysis Phase	Focus Area	The Multiple Lenses Utilized for Data Analysis	Answers Research Question (RQ)
Stage 1	LDC Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Client* 2) Autobiographical/Practitioner 3) Life-Design Counseling (Goals) 4) Additional Career Theories (Holland, Law & Krumboltz) 	RQ 1
Stage 2	LDC Process (4 stages)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Construction 2) Deconstruction 3) Reconstruction 4) Co-construction 	RQ 2
Stage 3	LDC Key Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Relationship 2) Reflection 3) Sense-Making 	RQ 3

*Adapted from Brookfield's (2017) four lens reflective model.

counsellor's common master narrative prompted two modifications to the LDC process. First was the decision to omit the list of suitable occupations in Jane's life-portrait. Second, in view of LDC's narratability goal, the client's ability to recite the new story to audiences was restricted to the counsellor. This is because in India, for most part of an individual's life, he/she is financially supported by their parents. Their life/career goals are considered the family's goals. Declaring any deviation from the original plan, as decided with parents is considered a sign of disrespect. The utilization of an alternative audience for this purpose is discussed later.

Results

Life-Design Counselling's core elements are relationship, reflection and sense-making. A collaborative relationship provides a safe space and holding environment wherein counsellors prompt self-reflection and sense-making to produce intentionality. Several instances during Jane and Drew's LDC interventions pointed towards the requirement for a stronger working alliance. For example, during CCI Jane mentioned 'feeling creepy', indicating she wasn't expecting to identify a pattern within her responses to the lifeline and CCI. Also, after the first session, Drew's comment 'I don't know what will emerge from this discussion, but I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation' indicated lack of clarity about LDC process and purpose.

The lifeline exercise elicited a rich transition narrative. Nevertheless, further scope for reflection was identified. Savickas (2011) recommends practitioners help clients acknowledge how transition 'feels' to them as they prepare to enter a new story. During the feedback interview, Jane mentioned going through 'a gamut of emotions,' whereas, Drew's emotional experience was restricted to early recollections. Deeper reflection could have helped Drew recognize the emotional connection between his current situation and early recollections, to facilitate the acknowledgement of his life theme. There was, however, a noticeable change in Drew's body language at this stage. As the narrated life-portrait revealed intrinsic details, Drew's posture changed from interestedly leaning forward to leaning back

and crossing his arms. He maintained this posture throughout the remainder of the session, deflecting any attempts to address his beliefs. This could have been due to Drew's generally restrained personality or due to the element of culture with gender, wherein he felt uncomfortable coming across as vulnerable to a female counsellor. It indicated that Drew was potentially unprepared for LDC's psychodynamic approach.

Both clients described LDC as a positive experience. As Jane bid a final goodbye she held up the mission statement and said: 'This gives me hope'. Whereas, Drew said: 'I would have preferred some critical feedback, as it signifies scope for improvement'. This is evident of the client's lack of career confidence or self-esteem as a result of community influence, which is a common feature of India's collectivist context. Also, at the end of their respective interventions, both clients' said they knew the answer to their transition query. This is a key principle of LDC, which was explained to both clients - that the solution lies within them. Although Jane acknowledged the role of LDC, Drew nonchalantly stated knowing everything beforehand.

Life-Design Counseling makes clients become fully aware of how they articulate salient life roles in relation to some major future expectations. Counsellors then encourage clients to find ways to achieve these expectations, such as defining priorities, identifying support, cultivating resources, and engaging in activities. Counsellor's awareness regarding the role of gender in Indian culture helped identify Jane's attempts to balance her child/daughter role (and related expectations) and worker role, with the leisurite role. This was confirmed while assessing her transition narrative (mentioned love for sports) with her list of hobbies (did not feature sports). In case of Drew, the MBA seemed to be a family legacy he wanted to take forward, more than a course of interest. This aligns with the cultural context, where extended family dynamics and domestic arrangements mean that is fairly common for children and their achievements to be compared with their cousins to encourage progress. Correspondingly, self-esteem issues with Drew were identified based on him admitting that he runs away from appreciation, suggesting advantages to using strength building exercises with Indian clients.

Recommendations for Practice

A key component of the counselling relationship is a strong working alliance, which creates the foundation for an effective counselling intervention. Even while setting goals and describing tasks, counsellors establish the working alliance by eliciting emotions and offering comfort (Savickas, 2011). But in India, not everyone is comfortable articulating emotions. Therefore, while screening and contracting, clients need to be informed that to draw maximum benefit from LDC, they should be willing to engage with their emotions.

Compatibility between counsellor and client beliefs and expectations is also crucial to strengthening the working alliance (Cardozo, 2015). LDC is a new form of career intervention for Indian clients habituated to a prescriptive approach. Therefore client expectations should be addressed before initiating LDC. Counsellors need to establish a collaborative partnership, while emphasizing that clients are the sole experts on their lives and encourage them to actively analyse their micro-stories. Apprehensions about the value of this can be addressed by emphasising LDC's aim to empower clients with tools for lifelong career management and decision-making.

In order to enhance shared construction by the client and counsellor, scope for further client reflection and self-examination was identified. Maree (2013) recommends that counsellors repeatedly read client responses back to them and request clients to authorize and validate (or invalidate) the counsellor's interpretations. When clients believe that they are being heard and feel validated, they reflect more deeply on their career narratives. In this manner, validity, credibility and trustworthiness can be established to further strengthen the working alliance and facilitate sense-making.

Comprehension of the client's own narrative identities emerges from dialogue (Savickas, 2011). Through effective dialogue, the counsellor needs to induce a concrete experience (Kolb, 1984). Only if the experience is sufficiently concrete will it be suitable for construction, or bring forth the client's thoughts, beliefs and emotions for reflective self-examination and deconstruction in the subsequent stage. This leads to another important aspect to be considered while

setting client expectations and prompting reflection i.e., having confidence in the concept of 'bricolage'.

Savickas (2015b) describes bricolage as constructing something new from whatever is at hand. As practitioners prompt reflection through CCI, they should further inquire about the cultural plots and metaphors that the client has used to articulate his or her most profound concerns and fundamental truth. These elements work as source material for biographical bricolage, wherein the counsellor engages the client in a dialogue with these sources of their own self, to rearrange them and direct client decision making. The lifeline activity provides wider scope for biographical bricolage and should be utilized intelligently. Thoughtful questioning by the counsellor will facilitate reflection and self-awareness, while CCI and lifeline will represent the scaffolding for self-assembly and reassembly (Savickas, 2015b).

After building any structure, the builder views it from all four sides to get an overall assessment. Similarly during the construction stage, after constructing the concrete experience, it should be assessed from all the perspectives summarized by Savickas (2015a), as listed in Table 3. below. This multi-dimensional analysis will demonstrate what the concrete experience symbolically represents for the client, and the tension that holds it together. Therefore, for learning outcomes from a successful LDC intervention, each stage of the LDC process should be analyzed from all four perspectives before moving on to the subsequent stage.

Describing the Indian value system, Arulmani uses the term 'Dharma' reflecting porous boundaries between self and other (Arulmani, 2011). These values are highly prevalent as Indian parents believe their child's success is representative of their own success, while children perceive parental expectations as their own (Bhalla, 2017). Tien (2015) also highlights how in eastern cultures, family is a part of the whole picture for self-construction. These characteristics of collectivist societies and analysis of the two LDC interventions, call for considering life roles (and role salience) as part of LDC.

Some techniques focused on life-roles may not be suitable for an Indian context. The Life-Role Analysis,

Table 3. Four Phases of Life-Design Counseling Process

Client Experience	Life Designing	Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984)	Client Operations (Watson & Rennie, 1994)
Tension	Construct	Concrete Experience	Symbolic Representation
Attention	Deconstruct	Reflective Observation	Reflexive self-examination
Intention	Reconstruct	Abstract Conceptualization	New Realizations
Extension	Co-Construct	Active Experimentation	Revisoning Self

wherein clients examine costs and benefits of the culturally defined and gender-based role expectations they picked-up based on parental messages and those garnered from media and society, may be perceived as disrespectful towards families and culture. Therefore, administering the Life-Space Map (Brott, 2005) may be more suitable. Thereby, the concept of life roles can be explored through the Life-Space Map, where clients are given a blank sheet of paper and asked to draw a circle representing them. Additional circles representing other people are also drawn with a double ring around those related to the presenting problem. These circles are drawn on paper in a spatial relationship to the client (i.e., close, overlapping and distant) with the counsellor providing exploratory prompts.

In this research, both clients volunteered information on their short, medium and long term goals indicating the increasing clarity of their intentions. However, further facilitated action and planning (with sense-making) is recommended using the future-focused, extended lifeline exercise (Brott, 2005). On a lifeline exercise sheet, clients can mark their life goals and related events with tentative future dates. This future-focused lifeline can be placed onto the previous lifeline, to demonstrate the client's life theme extending into the future. Thereafter, counsellor and client can discuss the values, beliefs and steps required for the achievement of those goals and their match with the client's mission statement.

Savickas (2015a) emphasizes the role of audience in achieving the goal of narratability and facilitating action. He states that sharing their re-authored stories with important audiences is a critical component of the client's action plan. Clients need to secure validation of relevant audiences and marshal social resources towards performances of new roles. Indian clients consider parents the most important audience, yet they are uncomfortable sharing their mission statement with them. Savickas (2015a) emphasizes that counsellors should encourage clients to ground their new stories in a secure base by narrating it to an audience outside of the counselling session. Briddickk and Sensoy-Briddickk (2013) recommend helping the client recruit 'known', 'imaginary' or 'introduced' audiences for his purpose.

Tien (2015) recommends strength-centred career counselling for Asian clients. Her suggestion to encourage clients to think positively is highly relevant because doing well is considered a child's obligation. Instead of rejoicing in their strengths, family and relatives tend to compare their child's achievements to his/her peers and children of their peers with shortcomings as a focal point of discussion. Drew's inability to accept appreciation, expecting criticism from the counsellor and his lack of career confidence reflect this common trend. Hence, strength building exercises would be highly recommended for clients within a collectivist context.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this current research study, one can conclude that Life-Design Counseling can be an effective career intervention for the Indian context. However, for LDC to be successful, practitioners need to focus on instilling confidence in their clients and empowering them to find the solution situated within them. From the cultural perspective, it was found that for India's collectivist value system, the exploration of the concept of life roles through reflection may significantly contribute to the overall LDC experience. Practitioners who are familiar with the client's cultural orientation and outlook are certainly at an advantage while counselling. However, counsellors who lack knowledge of the cultural script followed in countries with a collectivist orientation can utilize the concept of life-roles to understand and acknowledge the client's context. In this manner, practitioners can demonstrate empathy and administer a culturally resonant career intervention.

This qualitative study is the first inquiry into Life-Design Career Counseling within the Indian context. It should be noted, this study is based on AR conducted with a small volunteer sample (i.e., two clients) and extensive review of LDC and related literature. Whilst we are not generalizing that the conclusions in this research are applicable to the entire urban population of India, the detailed and rich account of the clients and practitioner experience is appealing to the concept of transferability. This means that what has been researched in this study will be of interest to other researchers interested in Life-Design Counseling and will add to the literature on LDC applicability.



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