

# The need for contextually appropriate career counselling assessment: Using narrative approaches in career counselling assessment in African contexts

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This article reports on the value of using narrative approaches in career counselling assessment in African contexts in addition to quantitative approaches to enhance the contextual relevance of assessment. The narrative represents a response to calls for local research on career counselling assessment theory and practice. A number of factors that co-determine the development of theory and assessment-related strategies are elaborated herein. The view is expressed that the feasibilities of the 21st-century labour markets should co-determine assessment-related strategies and theory development. In addition, the imperative to constantly innovate assessment in career counselling is emphasised against the background of the shift in emphasis from climbing the career ladder to flourishing in unstructured occupational contexts before some caveats for the successful implementation of postmodern approaches to assessment in career counselling are explicated briefly. The call for advancing the theory base in career counselling assessment-related matters in Global South contexts in general and African contexts in particular is repeated. It is concluded that career counselling assessment theory and practice should be conceptualised from the key perspective that it should particularly meet the basic criteria of contextual relevance.

**Keywords:** narrative approaches in career counselling; assessment in Global South contexts; quantitative approaches; enhancing contextual relevance; innovation in career counselling assessment.

## Introduction

Many authors have not only called for innovation in particular, and reshaping of the theory and practice of career psychology in general but also for greater embedment of assessment in career counselling in national contexts (e.g. Gerrits & Maree, 2019a; Maree & Gerrits, 2019; Maree & Molepo, 2016; Stead & Watson, 2017). Criticism of Global North (North American and Eurocentric) career counselling theory and intervention in Global South (developing) countries have especially called for research on approaches to career counselling theory and practice that are more harmonious with the conditions of a developing country (Lopez Levers, May, & Vogel, 2011), rather than to uncritically accept approaches, questionnaires and interventions developed elsewhere in the world. Researchers and practitioners alike have called for cultural, educational, gender and socio-economic factors to be considered to advance the relevance of career counselling in these contexts in particular (Alika & Egbochuku, 2009; Metz & Guichard, 2009).

This aim is in keeping with the following sentiments expressed by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2010):

The history of development and use of psychometric measuring devices, instruments, methods and techniques in South Africa have been tainted by the legacy of segregation which influenced certain stereotypical attitudes and culturally insensitive and inappropriate interventions. As a result very few tests are available that have been developed and applied with the necessary appreciation of cultural and other diversity concerns with a view to standardizing same for all South Africans. (p. 1)

This statement makes clear that psychologists in general should carefully and consistently re-consider whether the approaches and associated instruments and interventions they draw on (i.e. their assessment-related activities in general) adequately equip them with the know-how to assess and prepare their clients for rapidly changing global contexts.

Below, the author elaborates on what has been said so far.

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## The need for updating local research on career counselling assessment theory and practice

Watson (2013) maintained that career theory in general – and career construction theory, practice and assessment in particular – may fail to meet the needs of clients from all cultural groups, especially non-white, non-Western, non-standard populations ('non-career ... the underclass, the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, the disaffected' (p. 6) in particular). It is of particular concern that only a small number of psychometric tests and corresponding and trustworthy qualitative assessment techniques and strategies have been designed specifically for diverse African populations (Maree, 2013). Some models, strategies, questionnaires and tests developed in North American and Eurocentric contexts can be adapted, re-standardised and subsequently implemented especially in third world (developing country) contexts. In addition, as mentioned earlier, research should at the same time be conducted to design and develop models, strategies, interventions, questionnaires (qualitative) and tests locally to facilitate career counselling in developing countries. In this regard, the author supports Stead and Watson's (2017) call for appropriate assessment and establishment of the applicability of career counselling theory and practice to population groups that differ from the population groups for whom they were developed originally instead of uncritically assuming its applicability. These views are consistent with the sentiments expressed by Oakland (2004), who maintained that the design and development of (qualitative and quantitative) assessment instruments and matching interventions and so on should form part of the broader socio-economic aims of any country.

## From climbing the career ladder to flourishing in unstructured and rapidly changing occupational contexts

Up until the latter part of the previous century, individuals would mostly choose a career, gradually climb the ladder within that career and its clearly demarcated structures, and stay in it for the rest of their career-lives; even staying with one enterprise right through their career-lives. However, the situation has changed considerably: few people in Global North contexts especially, but, to an increasing extent, in Global South contexts too do likewise. Quite the opposite. Workers of today transit from one job and one work environment to another repeatedly. In addition, in the current uncertain and fluid career world, they are expected to negotiate and navigate multiple work-related transitions (and deal regularly with work-related trauma) in the course of their career-lives. This ever-changing situation is impacting fundamentally the way in which career counselling should be provided to address the needs of contemporary career counsellors and respond adequately to changes taking place

in the world of work. Simply asking a number of questions that relate to their personal and family history, letting them complete a few interest and personality inventories, inquiring about their study orientation and letting them complete intelligence or aptitude tests, after which they are 'told' what they 'must' do to ensure an optimal fit between their traits and possible work environments by an expert career counsellor (in other words, career education or career guidance is provided) no longer suffice. The view that a linear career 'path' should be chosen is considered defunct today. Such an approach contributes to a large extent to the inordinately high dropout rates at tertiary level. The vast majority of prospective students are never allowed to recount their career-life stories (narratability), reflect on these stories and draw on these stories reflexively ((auto)biographicity) (Savickas, 2019) to uncover their key career-life themes and draw on their own inner advice (see later). Consequently, many students lack a sense of meaning and purpose when they enter tertiary training environments, display a curious inability to adapt to changing circumstances and subsequently either drop out and migrate to another field of study (without having received *avant-garde* career counselling). Many of them eventually either end up feeling stuck in a world of work that they experience as frustrating and unfulfilling or end up being inadequately employable.

Fugate and Kinicki (2008) referred to the importance of individuals' dispositional employability as 'a constellation of individual differences that predispose employees to (pro-) actively adapt to their work and career environments' and confirmed that 'employability is a disposition that captured individual characteristics that foster adaptive behaviours and positive employment outcomes' (p. 504). In other words, adaptability could be regarded as the vehicle that influences and shapes people's employability potential. Seen from this perspective, the 'new' approach serves to bolster people's potential to find sustainable and decent work. Moreover, this approach aims to help people make meaning of their career-lives and experience a sense of purpose and hope in their career-lives instead of merely deciding on a field of study, completing their studies, or training and finding work.

Next, the author briefly elaborates on a number of factors that co-determine the development of theory and assessment-related strategies.

## Factors that co-determine career theory development and assessment-related strategies

Multiple global occupational changes during the past few decades especially call for timely and appropriate responses from career counselling theorists, practitioners and researchers to ensure that people seeking career counselling are receiving career counselling interventions that are compatible with developments in the field. Establishing success in a career, for instance, is becoming ever more unpredictable. The notion of 'climbing the ladder' is

becoming redundant in many workplace contexts (Bimrose, 2010), prompting career psychology theorists, practitioners and researchers to theorise about career counselling and implement *avant-garde* practical career counselling strategies to help them deal with the uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety that inevitably characterise new occupational environments. In these environments, large numbers of people lose their jobs, fail to find employment or discover that their qualifications have become redundant and no longer suffice to help them find employment. Globally, consensus is growing that the focus of career counselling has shifted from 'matching' people's personalities to 'fitting' career environments to blending careers into people's lives and lifestyles more satisfactorily. Moreover, there is general agreement that people's careers should be integrated into their lifestyle rather than the other way round. In addition, workers are increasingly being subjected to trauma at the workplace. For these and other reasons, innovative ways must be found to help workers deal with this trauma – inherently a side effect of recurrent workplace transitions.

The above paragraph confirms the view that the feasibilities of the 21st-century labour markets should co-determine assessment-related strategies and theory development. This statement is evidenced by the changing vocabulary of the career counselling discourse. Concepts, such as internationalisation, globalisation of the workforce, labour surplus, diversification, multi-skilling and the gig economy, reflect researchers' and practitioners' almost desperate attempts to regain a sense of control over a situation that sometimes appears to be slipping out of control. Likewise, there is no contesting the key importance of acquiring Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills (especially in the light of the fourth and maybe even fifth industrial revolution (Work 4.0 and Work 5.0) (Maree, 2019b; Schwab, 2016; Schwab & Samans, 2016). The fourth wave in career counselling (ca. 1990–2010) was characterised by uncertainty, protean and boundaryless careers, de-jobbing and the disappearance of standard jobs (Savickas, 2015). The fifth wave in career counselling will be characterised by attempts to enable people to navigate repeated transitions brought about by fundamental changes in ICT triggered by the digital revolution (Gillwald, 2019; Gurri, 2013). Gillwald (2019) predicts that the sixth wave, that is the Kondratiev wave, will be related to renewable energy. In the meantime, we are bombarded by predictions of changing employment patterns, such as the prediction that robots will soon take over the vast majority of jobs and that, in the future, human beings will have to deal with a situation where notifications such as 'No jobs available' will be supplemented by ones that state 'Humans need not apply'.

Irrespective of individuals' perspective on these matters, there seems to be a consensus that helping people make meaning and lead a purposeful life in a 'jobless world', and this can or has already become a key element of career counsellors' job. Gillwald (2019) further contends that Schumpeter's (1942, 1982 [1934]) idea of 'creative destruction' (the disassembling of time-honoured practices to pave the

way for innovation) underpins currently a great deal of postmodern innovation theory and informs speculations about the value of disruption as a theoretically constructive economic and social influence (Henton & Held, 2013). This view is wholly in line with current thinking in career counselling that advocates the idea of active mastery passive suffering and the idea of converting challenge into opportunity and challenge or 'problems' into prospects, positive expectations, possibilities and hope (Savickas, 2019).

Whereas, during the fourth wave, the predominant helping models in career psychology have been career counselling and life-design counselling (models that will, in all likelihood, still prevail during the first part of the fifth wave at least), from my vantage point, during the fifth wave (extending into the sixth wave), the focus could be life purpose counselling as the predominant helping model and focussed on inspiration, promoting social justice, purpose, ethical behaviour and the common good to marry the needs of humans with the skills of robots. From this perspective, contextualising and innovating assessment in career counselling to equip career counsellors fittingly for their task of assessing and counselling their clients appositely in these rapidly changing times is non-negotiable.

## Contextualising career counselling theory and practice in Global South contexts

Global South contexts are typically characterised by poverty and a severe lack of resources. Fewer work opportunities are available than in Global North contexts and unemployment is mostly widespread and ever-increasing. However, in the vast majority of contexts, there are pockets of affluence. Therefore, whilst the majority of contexts are seriously deprived (disadvantaged), a few will display a flourishing character. For this reason, in Global South contexts, career counselling as a field should cater for the needs of both privileged and disadvantaged groups. Different kinds of career counselling styles (based on different theoretical orientations) will be necessary to be drawn on to address the divergent needs of individuals from diverse contexts. In affluent contexts (that resemble those contexts where newer, postmodern theory and intervention were initially developed), and especially in one-on-one contexts, postmodern approaches, including self-construction and career construction (Guichard, 2009; Savickas, 2019; Savickas et al., 2009) (and life-design counselling), are increasingly gaining traction. This is not the case in poverty-stricken regions, although where group career counselling is the order of the day in a few regions where such a service is provided. In these contexts, the traditional person–environment fit model (vocational guidance) still prevails. Researchers such as Albién (2018), Maree (2017a, 2017b, 2017c), Maree, Cook and Fletcher (2018) and Watson (2013) have demonstrated the value of contextualising and then applying self-construction and career construction and life-design counselling successfully for use in (South) African contexts

and also applying this successfully in individual African contexts. Maree (2017b), in particular, has shown how life-design counselling could be adjusted for use in group-based African contexts. However, the application of these newer approaches remains woefully inadequate in African contexts.

## Innovating assessment in career counselling in Global South contexts

The author concurs with Phares' (1992) statement that the primary allegiance of psychologists should be to devising best ways to be helpful to clients instead of to any given theoretical approach and associated techniques and interventions. Therefore, to promote the rigour (validity, reliability and trustworthiness) of any assessment and intervention technique or strategy, it is a key to constantly innovate and contextualise conceptual frameworks and associated intervention strategies carefully before using them in contexts that differ from the original contexts for which they were originally conceptualised. Therefore, reflecting theoretically and making practical suggestions on reshaping and adapting career theory and practice should, in contexts of developing country, occur at the following two levels:

- innovating career counselling constantly and actively, in combination with
- constantly contextualising career counselling.

Therefore, to facilitate *avant-garde* career counselling in collectivist, third world (under-developed and developing countries) contexts, especially where people (either the majority of people or members of minority groups) have been subjugated or colonised for decades and longer, innovation is particularly important. A few matters that lie at the heart of our efforts to update, innovate and contextualise career counselling are highlighted below.

Firstly, the need to provide career counselling to all people across the diversity spectrum. The South African Career Development Association's (SACDA) efforts in this regard should therefore be applauded and strongly supported (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2017).

Secondly, ensuring that career counselling is provided in various formats depending on the most pressing need that exists in any given context. This includes the provision of (1) basic career counselling-related information (which could be provided by suitably trained practitioners with a grade 12 certificate), (2) career education, guidance and development (services that could be provided by non-psychologists with apposite training) and (3) career counselling (i.e. the psychological dimension of career counselling) that could only be provided by psychologists.

Thirdly, understanding the great need to not only provide group-based career counselling but also to promote group-based integrative qualitative–quantitative career

counselling across (South) Africa. Whilst there would always be a need for one-on-one career counselling, the vast need is to make available career counselling to all people. The caveat is the importance to uphold and promote the rigour of all interventions.

Fourthly, a willingness by all to embrace newer developments in addition to a commitment to receive adequate training of these newer developments in theory and practice.

Fifthly, an understanding of the fact that inadequate or inappropriate career counselling, without any doubt, contributes to worrying dropout rates at institutions of education and training.

Lastly, acceptance of the key role of career counselling to promote global efforts to provide sustainable decent work for all.

In the next section, the value of utilising and integrating qualitative and quantitative interventions is discussed briefly.

## The value of utilising and integrating qualitative and quantitative interventions

Inadequate research has been conducted on the value of subjective (qualitative, storied or narrative) interventions and associated techniques in career counselling along with quantitative approaches in Global South, especially in the context of a developing country (Maree, 2010, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). In many Global North contexts, however, the use of integrative career counselling approaches (integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches and interventions) has grown exponentially in popularity (McMahon & Watson, 2015). Against this background, part of the resolution for contemporary career counselling challenges in the context of a developing country seems to be the use of an integrative qualitative–quantitative approach to career counselling premised on the principles of self-construction and career construction (that comprise the basis of life-design counselling). Summarised, from a postmodern and storied perspective, self-construction and career construction interventions entail elicitation of clients' career-life stories (phase 1), validation of these stories by them (phase 2) and the planning and enactment of the future chapters in these stories by carrying out action steps that are jointly conceptualised and agreed upon by counsellors and their clients. These steps promote clients' career adaptability (including their career concern, career control, career curiosity and career confidence). Consequently, their employability, too, is enhanced (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). When people share their autobiographies, they could be helped to identify their key life themes and find out what really drives or motivates them. This approach has been shown to identify people's deep-seated strengths and motives and helps them reflect first on their career-life stories and then on their reflections (meta-reflect) in the context of a 'typical' developing country

(Maree, 2017a). These meta-reflections facilitate scaffolding for action and forward movement (Savickas, 2015). This approach could enable career counsellors to help people regain a sense of meaning, purpose and hope in their career-lives, even, I surmise, in a 'jobless world'.

The integrative approach is premised on the acknowledgement of the need to make use of subjective (stories) and objective (scores) factors to help people confronting repeated crossroads manage past, present and the future trauma and triumph over challenges by reflexive constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing and co-constructing of their career-life stories, and transforming 'problems' or challenges into opportunities, disappointments into accomplishments, and hurt into healing. This approach endorses Duffy and Dik's (2009) view that:

[O]nce clients have addressed the broad level of life purpose or meaning, a next step is for counselors to help clients connect what they view as their life purpose or role in the larger society with their activity within the work role. (p. 441)

The integrative approach is founded on the notion of career as a story and is closely aligned with self-construction and career construction counselling theories. These theories are encapsulated in the encompassing life-design approach and intervention. The life-design approach represents the first-ever coordinated career counselling theory (Savickas et al., 2009). It was induced by the need for lifelong, holistic and contextual career counselling interventions to help people preserve perspective and hope in rapidly changing work contexts (Maree, 2010, 2015). Life-design intervention comprises a space-bound, time-bound and context-bound type of career counselling intervention. It builds on and integrates career construction and self-construction with those idiosyncratic aspects that feature play in people's career-lives. Eliciting and drawing on people's career-life stories represent an invaluable mechanism for enabling life design (McAdams, 2001). Life design 'emphasizes narratability to tell one's story coherently, adaptability to cope with changes in self and situation, and intentionality to design a successful life' (Hartung, 2013, p. 11). It could be utilised to help people actualise their potential and make meaningful social contributions. This approach seems especially germane for use in African contexts (Maree, 2019b), shaped by *ubuntu*, *isinti*, *ujamaa* [broadly speaking, the emphasis on the extended family, brotherhood, and familyhood; the belief that human beings become persons through other people or the community] and associated principles (Nussbaum, Palsule, & Mkhize, 2010) and the birth place of the notion of storytelling.

Curiously, in the corridors of conference venues, the author was asked questions such as 'But will the storied approach "work" in a developing country such as South Africa?' Essentially, this kind of question reflects ignorance about the fact that storytelling lies at the very heart of African cultures and that drawing on the elicitation of stories comes natural in African contexts (Sonn, Stevens, & Duncan, 2013; Stevens, Duncan, & Sonn, 2013). Using a storied approach in these contexts makes a perfect sense. In fact, using the storied

approach is unquestionably harmonious with Global South contexts (especially the African contexts). In fact, narrating stories on various occasions and for various reasons has been 'practised' across Africa for millennia. Stevens, Duncan, and Sonn (2013, p. 18), for instance, contend that 'black history ... has been passed on through the art of storytelling'. Underlying the tradition of 'storytelling' is the paradigm of social constructionism. Stated briefly, this theory advances identity formation in preference to personality traits, career adaptability in place of 'maturity', using 'stories' or narratives (a qualitative approach) together with 'scores' (numbers; a quantitative approach) and action as opposed to inaction and intent. This approach also advances the importance of becoming employable rather than finding work or a job (employment) (often the sole aim in disadvantaged contexts where job opportunities are extremely limited). In the long run, this approach strives to help people negotiate and deal with repeated occupational transitions during their working lives and transform career counselling assessment into intervention. In the process, (critical) self-reflection, reflexivity as well as dialogical (social) meanings of co-construction (between clients and their counsellors) are advanced (Blustein, Palladino Schulteiss, & Flum, 2004; Cardoso, Silva, Goncalves, & Duarte, 2014).

At the very least, it seems to be a key to contextualise theory and practice developed elsewhere in contexts that differ from the contexts in which these theories and practices were initially developed. In the following, this matter is briefly discussed.

## Some caveats for the successful implementation of postmodern approaches to assessment (and intervention) in career counselling

The successful introduction of integrative approach depends strongly on a number of factors, including the following:

- Allowing sufficient time and facilitating sufficient training opportunities for career counsellors to acquaint and familiarise themselves with the approach.
- Acceptance of the value and importance of the approach as a mechanism to enable them to respond appropriately to sweeping changes in the occupational world.
- Adjustment of career counselling training programmes to reflect the contents of integrative approach by the education and psychology departments of universities and other tertiary training institutions. Based on personal experiences of the writer as a lecturer of career counselling at various levels and at different training institutions, the integrative approach is embraced and greatly appreciated by not only Master's students but also by students from other levels of training.
- Career counsellors who have been trained in traditional modes of career counselling, too, should be privy to further training opportunities to introduce them to newer, different and more respectful career counselling approaches that more satisfactorily respond to the different demands associated with the rapidly changing world of work.

- Acceptance by career counsellors that their allegiance in career counselling should be to promote the best interests of their clients. As there is a global acceptance of merit and importance of integrative approach, and because research has shown conclusively the value of different postmodern approaches to career counselling, there appears to be no excuse for not doing so (Duarte, Paixão, & da Silva, 2019; Hartung, 2019; Maree, 2019a).

## Conclusion

This article endeavours to demonstrate the importance of using narrative approaches in career counselling assessment in African contexts in addition to quantitative approaches to enhance contextual relevance. It highlights the need for approaches that are more harmonious with the conditions of a developing country. The author has argued that providing career counselling is a multidimensional enterprise. By contextualisation and constant innovation, career counselling is especially important in collectivist, Global South (developing country) contexts where people have been suppressed and colonised for decades and where the cultures often differ widely from the contexts in which theories and practices were initially developed, and authentic career counselling has often been obstructed. The article is concluded by reiterating that career counselling assessment theory and practice should be conceptualised from the key perspective that it should particularly meet the basic criteria of contextual relevance.

## An afterthought

It seems important to note Sharf's (2013) assertion that:

[N]o career theories of development have been formulated to apply specifically to one culture or another. However, research has been done on the applicability of particular career development theories to specific cultural groups. (p. 17)

The author concurs with Watson (2013) that the first part of Sharf's statement is particularly problematic. Recently, Shuttleworth-Edwards (2018) asked whether population-based norms are becoming 'obsolete', citing Suchy's (2016) assertion that 'defining a population by country borders only makes sense to the extent that countries are characterised by a single language and a unified educational content'. This is, of course, no longer the case in the majority of contexts because of 'globalization, migration, and population diversity around the world' (Suchy, 2016, p. 973). Noting the aforementioned observations, the author of this article cannot help but wonder: should Sharf's (2013) assertion not maybe be tweaked to read 'career theories of development [can no longer be conceptualised as if they] should be formulated to apply specifically to one culture [or context] or another.' (Sharf, 2013, p. 17) (my own emphasis added).

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The author has declared that no competing interests exists.

## Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical consideration

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