

# The outcomes of a mixed-methods, innovative group life design intervention with unemployed youths

Jacobus G. Maree<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to Jacobus G. Maree. Email: [kobus.maree@up.ac.za](mailto:kobus.maree@up.ac.za)

## Abstract

This article reports on an innovative life design intervention in a developing country context. A group of 31 unemployed youths were selected purposively to participate in the study. A mixed-methods design was adopted and an integrative qualitative-quantitative approach employed to construct and analyse the data. The Maree Career Matrix was used to assess participants' career interests while the Career Interest Profile was used to elicit their career-life stories. The Career Adapt-Abilities Scale was used for pre-test and post-test assessment. The intervention prompted change in the participants' career lives, improved their self-understanding, and broadened their career-life perspectives.

**Keywords:** Integrative qualitative-quantitative career counselling; Disadvantaged context; Career Interest Profile; Maree Career Matrix; Unemployed women

## Introduction

Scrutiny of recent changes in the world of work reveals a number of distinct themes that shaped the lens used to analyse and interpret the data discussed in this article (see e.g. Hall, 2013; Maree, 2018; Savickas, 2013, 2019). These authors have highlighted the challenges posed by the changing world of work but also possible ways of overcoming the challenges. They state first of all that the erstwhile 'safety' blanket provided by employers and organisations is fast disappearing. The notion of stable and secure work-related structures and 'guarantees' of lifelong employment in one organisation with a guaranteed income, a 13th cheque, and a good pension are rapidly disappearing. The days are gone when the main aim of career counselling and the 'ultimate' goal of school-leavers were to find a 'job'. Lifelong learning aimed at remaining employable has become the order of the day. Part-time and/or short-term work contracts are replacing stable work with one or two organisations over a person's lifetime. The result is that many employees must transition from one work assignment to another, often being 'hired' only for a short period until the assignment has ended.

While sharing global concerns about the possible adverse effects of work-related developments associated with the advent of the fourth industrial revolution, I also acknowledge that many career counselling researchers, academics, and practitioners have a different view. Rabat and Freedman (2019), for instance, believe that this 'revolution' will bring about numerous exciting job opportunities. The authors contend that research has revealed that, above all, workers want stable, predictable jobs, self-worth, and dignity in the workplace. Workers' deepest need is to attain self-worth through their work—a key activity that connects them to something bigger

than themselves and to other people. This article should be read and interpreted from this perspective.

Many (some say most) people will eventually become employed in work environments that differ widely from the ‘traditional’ work environments that were characterised by hierarchical structures, and they will be left on their own to construct themselves and their careers. However, irrespective of what happens, numerous workers will still have to ‘fit’ into the traditional top-down occupational structures. These people will continue to be subjected to notions of ‘toe the line’ and ‘respect the rules’, yet, at the same time, they will have to learn to network at various levels and with various entities in an ever-growing global village. In addition, many people will have to accept virtually any kind of employment to ‘survive’ in challenging economic conditions. Notwithstanding this, however, we as career counselling researchers, theorists, and practitioners will have to remain guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all especially) (UN, 2016). Regardless of the occupational structures in which workers find themselves, we will need to promote the right of all workers (Guichard, 2013) to find decent “work [that] helps all workers attain a sense of self-respect and dignity, experience freedom and security in the workplace, and...[allows them] opportunity to choose and execute productive, meaningful and fulfilling work that will enable them to construct themselves adequately and without restrictions and make social contributions” (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016, p. 9).

Earlier (Maree, 2019a), I came up with the phrase “Mandela resolve” to refer to the kind of response and perspective that is called for in these changing times. By that I mean that it is short-sighted and unhelpful to use only the lens of ‘dealing with major challenges’ to investigate and manage major career-related changes. Instead, it is better to use the lens of taking advantage of opportunities that inevitably accompany and are inspired by such changes. This approach to dealing with change and its impact is in line with Cochran’s (1997) view on the importance of enabling workers to advance their individual life projects through purposeful action. It is congruent also with Savickas’ (2015) observation: “The 21st-century perspective on career counselling moves from the empiricism of objective vocational guiding and the humanism of subjective career developing to the social constructionism of projective life designing” (p. 136). According to Bruner (1987), too, “[w]e become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 15).

### **Career counselling’s response to changes in the world**

About a decade or so before the turn of the twentieth century, career counselling as a discipline witnessed a marked increase in the number of innovative theoretical and practical approaches to career counselling theory. They included systems theory (Patton & McMahon, 2014), chaos therapy (Pryor & Bright, 2011), self-construction theory (Guichard, 2009), and career construction theory (Savickas, 2015), which eventually crystallised into the theory of life design counselling (Savickas et al., 2009). Briddick et al., (2019) contextualise these developments by stating that “[o]ur experiences of working and its personal meanings in our lives ... has received greater attention as has the relational aspects of our working lives” (p. 253). In my opinion, this aim can best be achieved by applying the theory and practice of career construction counselling, which, together with self-construction theory, constitutes the origins of life design. It is ideally suited to enhance meaning-making and to uncovering a sense of hope, purpose, and self-worth in career counselling.

## **Life design counselling**

As mentioned earlier, this life design counselling paradigm ('approach') draws on, blends, realises, and expands career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2015, 2019) and self-construction theory (SCT) (Guichard, 2009; Guichard et al., 2012). It offers a career counselling and associated intervention strategy that can promote career choice in addition to self-construction and career construction. This model is devised and organised in a manner that extends from childhood into adulthood, augments the interpretation of people's lived experiences (Soresi & Nota, 2001), and prompts 'positive change' or forward movement. Ultimately, life design intervention aims to enhance people's (career) adaptability, narratability, autobiographicity, forward action, and employability. Life design intervention supports the view that personal development means adapting (formerly referred to as maturing) in a way that enables people to deal with a constantly changing environment (Savickas, 2015). It also sees career choice making as enabling people to adapt to their changing work conditions, thus, bringing about social co-construction of meaning. The social constructionist paradigm is fundamental to life design in that life design emphasises the subjective importance people attach to their lived experiences (Blustein et al., 2004). Summarised, life design intervention aims to make people career adaptable and more capable of navigating career-life transitions successfully. It also emphasises identity formation rather than personality, stories rather than scores, action rather than intention, and forward movement rather than inactivity. Ultimately, the aim is to construct a life built on personal values with regard to ethical concerns in relation to other people and the world they live in.

## **Career adaptability**

According to Fugate and Kinicki (2008), employability is a psychosocial concept associated with personal traits that promote adaptive understanding, performance, and feelings. Employability mindfulness prompts people to advance their career choice prospects actively, proactively, and adaptively by adapting to changing situations instead of waiting for and/or seeking help from others to improve their situation. Hartung (2011), Rossier et al. (2017), Savickas (2019), and others agree that modern-day career counsellors need to work actively towards developing and enhancing people's career adaptability and career resilience (Maree, 2018). Savickas and Porfeli (2012) argue that an intricate matrix of psychoeducational, psychosocial, and psychological resources underlies and stimulates development. People's readiness to make the most of available resources reflects adaptability, which be the solidification of "more durable psychological and more labile psychosocial aspects" that advance employability (p. 6). Savickas and Porfeli (2010) further contend that career adaptability's four dimensions, namely career concern, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence (key aspects of the above matrix), are the typical career adaptability assets and strategies drawn on by people when change is imposed upon them and they have to accomplish key tasks, manage multiple transitions, and deal with career choice traumas during life design (Savickas & Porfeli, 2010). Collectively, the four dimensions of career adaptability underpin the key attitudes, beliefs, and competencies (the ABCs of life design) that shape problem-solving and opportunity-recognising strategies as well as adaptive and coping behaviours (Hartung, 2011).

## **Rationale for the study**

First, there is general agreement on the need to update and innovate career counselling continually, which includes devising context-appropriate assessment of intervention

instruments and strategies. Second, career counselling must be updated in way that meets the needs of large groups of people in developing countries especially. Here, a way needs to be found to provide group career counselling for marginalised people such as unemployed women in rural areas. Third, little research has been done on the implementation of cutting-edge career counselling models and associated interventions (such as life design) in developing countries (Maree, 2019a). The present research on the influence of innovative group career counselling, using an integrative quantitative–qualitative approach, is, thus, a response to global calls for more research on group career counselling.

## **Research questions**

Five hypotheses were used to assess quantitatively whether the post-intervention scores on the *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS-SA)* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) were statistically significantly higher than the pre-intervention scores. It was hypothesised that the intervention would result in higher post-intervention scores in career concern; career control; career curiosity; the career confidence score; and the career adaptability score on the *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS-South Africa; Maree, 2012)*.

The research sought also to answer qualitatively the questions, “What was the influence of the intervention on the participants’ career adaptability?”, and “How did the participants experience the intervention?”.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and context**

The research was conducted at the Good Work Foundation (GWF) (2019) digital learning centre in Hazyview (a seriously disadvantaged, resource-scarce environment). The GWF offers basic literacy education and career-related training to school-aged and adult learners. Its open learning academies offer English, mathematics, and digital literacy as well as courses in life skills training for school-aged learners. Its career training academies offer career skills courses as well as digital literacy education and training for adult learners. After having successfully completed their training, some learners find employment locally or further afield while others enrol for online courses or for training at residential tertiary institutions.

I used purposive sampling to select 31 GWF students (from a total number of ca. 47 students) to participate in a life design project based on their willingness to participate; their inability to pay for career counselling; their inability to find any form of work or to be accepted for further study on account of their poor marks at the end of Grade 12; and/or their inability to pay for tertiary tuition.

All the participants were seriously disadvantaged, indigent, unemployed (recent) school-leavers who lacked the competences to become employable and the financial resources to enrol at tertiary training institutions. All of them were unable to find employment, to access in-service training, or to enrol at a tertiary training institution. Their chances of finding work were, therefore, remote. They were all enrolled in the bridging year offered to unemployed adult school-leavers (referred to above) so as to give them a second chance to improve their chances of acceptance into their chosen fields of study, which they previously did not qualify for. The goal of the bridging year was, thus, to enhance their employability, reinforce their career resilience, and increase their career agility.

Six of the male and one of the female participants chose not to attend the next two intervention sessions as they had either managed to secure employment and/or had found the first intervention session sufficient to help them decide on a future career and an associated field of study. The intervention group, therefore, comprised 24 participants (mean age = 20.28 years;  $SD = 4.55$  years).

## **Research design**

The study was aimed at constructing qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously. More specifically, an integrative, qualitative-quantitative mixed-methods intervention design was implemented in which quantitative data were collected during the pre-intervention and post-intervention phases of the project.

### **Data-constructing instruments: quantitative data**

#### ***Career interests and confidence***

The *Maree Career Matrix (MCM)* (Maree, 2017a) measures career interests and self-estimates of confidence to execute several careers successfully. Developed in South Africa, and based on social cognitive career theory, the *MCM* draws on (a) trait-and-factor, (b) career development, and (c) social learning theory. The questionnaire covers 152 occupations, each falling into one of 19 career categories (eight careers per category). The psychometric properties of the questionnaire include good reliability (all 19 categories demonstrate reliability coefficients  $> 0.70$ ) and validity, with Rasch analysis indicating that all the items in the questionnaire's interest scales assess a unitary construct. Test-retest reliability for career interests and confidence exceeds 0.70 for all *MCM* categories.

#### ***Career adaptability***

The *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-South Africa (CAAS-SA)* (Maree, 2012). Based on the *CAAS*, the *CAAS-SA* was the result of collaboration among 13 countries. It comprises 24 items and four scales (six items per scale) and measures Concern, Control, Curiosity, and Confidence as psychosocial resources that facilitate managing transitions, completing developmental tasks, and dealing with work-related traumas. The psychometric properties of the *CAAS-SA* are excellent, including exceptional reliability and satisfactory cross-national measurement equivalence (Maree, 2012).

### **Data-constructing instrument: qualitative**

#### ***Career interest profile (CIP) (version 6) (Maree, 2017b)***

The *CIP* reflects Adler (1929), Jung (1977), Savickas (2015), and others' views on qualitative/narrative/storied career counselling but was actually founded on career construction theory (Savickas, 2019). The questionnaire comprises four intentionally structured parts, namely, i. Biographical details, family-related influences, and work-related information; ii. Choosing five most and least preferred career preferences from a total of 19 career categories; iii. Six career choice-related questions; and 4. A general introductory as well as 15 narrative, career-life story questions. The *CIP* was devised to elicit people's central career-life themes and facilitate critical self-reflection, reflexivity, and self-reflexivity concerning their values, areas for development, strengths, and interests to promote self-advising in collaboration with

their career counsellors. Ultimately, the *CIP* is used to elicit inner advice on how to transform pain ('problems') and fears into hopeful themes that can be drawn on to advance people's individual career-life projects. See from this perspective, the *CIP* enables career counsellors to listen *for* instead of *to* people's career-life stories, story lines, and story themes (Maree, 2013, 2015; Savickas, 2016; Welty, 1998). The *CIP* has shown itself to be an effective career counselling instrument in various group contexts (Di Fabio & Maree, 2013).

## Procedure

In February 2018, I visited the GWF for two days. First of all, the facilitators asked the participants to divide themselves into a number of smaller groups (four participants per group). All of the participants were allowed to decide for themselves which group they preferred to join (Maree et al., 2017). Each group was headed by a trained career development practitioner (attached to the GWF). (All the groups were accommodated in the GWF main meeting hall, but individual groups were allowed to venture outside from time to time during Day 2 while I moved from group to group to provide guidance and clarify and answer questions.) On Day 1, I administered the *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-South Africa (CAAS-SA)* as a pre-test, followed by the *MCM* (ca. 60 min) and the *CIP* (ca. 120 min) in a group format. On Day 2, I conducted a life design intervention (see Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4, Table 1), which was followed by a brief (ca. 60 min) workshop with the participants on how to discover more about themselves and the world of work. I returned to the GWF at the beginning of June, 2018, to hold a three-hour follow-up workshop (see Step 5, Table 1). This was followed by a one-hour discussion on the importance and practical execution of job analysis. I requested the participants repeatedly to reflect verbally and in writing on their experiences of the sessions. Ongoing feedback was given to obviate misunderstanding, and all data interpretations were discussed and verified with the participants. The session ended by asking the participants to state their vision and mission statements (all sessions were again videotaped) and re-administering the *CAAS-SA*. In September, 2018, I returned for a brief follow-up workshop (Step 6, Table 1) to answer questions and see how the job analysis was progressing. Throughout the project, the participants were kept abreast of what we were doing and why, as well as what our next steps would be.

At the end of Session 1, I asked the participants the following questions.

1. (a)

What changes occurred during the intervention and what prompted these changes?

2. (b)

Which three moments did you consider the most significant during the intervention? (Elliott, 1986). According to Watson and Rennie (1994), these are the moments when something moves or 'shifts' for participants, that is, when insights unexpectedly occur.

The intervention was based on the strategy described by Savickas et al. (2009). The planned sequential intervention objectives and linking activities can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Life Design Intervention Plan (24 participants, divided into six groups of four participants per subgroup, participated in all intervention activities)

Steps	Intervention aim (Savickas et al., 2009)	Activities and techniques to achieve intervention outcomes
	The aim of the step was to ...	
General	Help the participants grow psychologically and enhance their well-being	Focusing on themes and patterns in the participants' own perceptions, life stories, and beliefs
Step 1	Establish a sound working relationship	Administration of the <i>CAAS</i> . General introduction and discussion of the programme. Group discussions to get to know each other (all the participants were asked to introduce themselves and state their desired outcomes for the intervention. All communications were videotaped; roughly 60 s per participant). Completion of Part 1 (biographical details) of the <i>CIP</i> (Ver. 6)
Step 2	Examine the participants' subjective sense of who they were by facilitating self-reflection and self-reflexivity	Completion of the <i>MCM</i> , followed by Parts 2, 3, and Part 4 of the <i>CIP</i> . Discussion of the participants' responses to questions on their strengths, areas for growth, etc. The participants then reflected on their responses
Step 3	Objectify the participants' multiple career-life stories (create an 'enlightening distance' between the participants and their stories) to uncover new perspectives on these stories	Drafting and recounting of the participants' identity statements and life story titles and headings. (Re)construction of life stories in terms of past and present chapters
Step 4	Scrutinise and bring into focus 'problematic' or challenging factors through new stories; Reaffirm the participants' capacity to construct and reconstruct identities	'Problems' were reviewed and regarded as opportunities Strengths and problem-solving competencies were identified and reconfirmed. Vision and mission (identity) statements were completed
Step 5	Construct new identities; Devise plans and associated strategies to help the participants negotiate barriers; Share 'new' stories with a compassionate audience	Identity statements were revisited Past ('hurtful') and future ('hopeful') stories as well as 'faulty' beliefs (cognitions) and inspiring decisions were juxtaposed Advice was elicited from within by revisiting favourite quotations
Step 6	Conduct follow-ups to monitor progress	Regular follow-ups and further interventions were done

## **Data analysis**

The qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed independently, and later linked and merged.

### ***Quantitative data analysis***

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used (a single sample with data not normally distributed). The effect size was calculated by  $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$  (Cohen, 1988) to determine the practical significance of the differences between the median pre-test and post-scores of the four CAAS-SA constructs. (Since only one male participant was included in the sample, scores could not be compared by gender.)

### ***Qualitative data analysis***

I followed an inductive-deductive data analysis method to analyse the participants' responses to the questions posed at the end of Session 2 and I asked an experienced external coder (with a doctorate in educational psychology) to analyse the data independently to increase interrater reliability. First, I drew on themes I had expected to find (the four CAAS-SA subscales, namely Concern, Control, Curiosity, and Confidence, served as a priori (predetermined) themes). Second, I looked for new themes and subthemes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis strategy was marginally adapted and used as my analytic strategy. Third, I transcribed, read, and re-read the participants' responses (the qualitative data). Fourth, tentative codes were constructed and the number of themes reduced. Fifth, I organised codes into themes and subthemes. Sixth, I labelled the themes and subthemes. Seventh, I assembled the data into one place according to the identified themes and subthemes. I also created and used a word cloud from the participants' reflections to enhance my analysis. At last, the findings were reported.

## **Quantitative results**

Table 2 shows improved scores on all four subscales as well as on the total scores of the CAAS-SA after the life design intervention programme. All the null hypotheses were rejected.

Table 2 indicates that all the participants revealed statistically significant improvement after the intervention. They all also revealed practically meaningful improvement on the CAAS-SA and its four dimensions. The largest practically meaningful improvement was in the Concern dimension.

## **Qualitative results**

It should be stated up front that while some of the participants were somewhat more vocal than others, this in no way influenced the smooth running of the proceedings. The spirit of *ubuntu* (that is, the typical African emphasis on the collective needs of people, as well as a deep sense of connection to others, compassion, and respect for the dignity of others that was evident in the rural area where the intervention took place) prevailed at all times. (Also see my observations on the issue of group dynamics below.)



**Table 2** Wilcoxon signed-rank test results: CAAS-SA ( $n=24$ )

CAAS-SA	Median	z-statistic	$p$ value (1 tailed)	Effect size ( $r$ )
CAAS-SA(overall): pre	82.0	3,39	<0.001**	0,69**
Post	96.0			
<b>CAAS-SA Subscales</b>				
Concern: pre	20.0	4,06	<0.001**	0,83**
Post	25.0			
Control: pre	21.5	2,82	0.003**	0,57**
Post	26.0			
Curiosity: pre	19.5	2,63	0.004**	0,54**
Post	22.0			
Confidence: pre	22.5	2,09	0.019*	0,43*
Post	24,5			

\* $p < 0.05$  Significant at the 5% level

\*\* $p < 0.01$  Significant at the 1% level

\* $r = 0.1$  (Small effect; 0.1–0.3 = small to medium effect)

\*\* $r = 0.3$  (Medium effect; 0.3–0.5 = medium to large effect)

\*\*\* $r = 0.5$  (Large effect; 0.5 and higher)

### *What changes occurred during the intervention and what prompted these changes?*

Deductively confirmed and inductively derived themes and subthemes are shown in Table 3.

To make sense of the gathered data, I used an approach that can best be described as **INDUCTIVE** deductive (uppercase indicating the greater emphasis given to inductive data analysis). Here, I concur with Bernard and Ryan's (2010, p. 107) view that "no matter how hard we try, there are no purely inductive (or deductive) studies". Jebb et al. (2017), too, maintain that scientific progress is enhanced when a satisfactory balance is established between inductive and deductive approaches. Implementing one of the approaches to the exclusion of the other can often be counterproductive (Tukey, 1980). Verbatim responses are provided below to substantiate the subthemes. The themes and their subthemes are corroborated by extracts from the participants' reflections, with the participants' responses only lightly edited to preserve their authenticity. I started the process of identifying themes and subthemes in the qualitative data by using, deductively, the four scales of the CAAS (Concern, Control, Curiosity, and Confidence) as a priori themes. I then identified new themes and subthemes on the basis of thematic data analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) in an attempt to provide a richer and more inclusive description of the data.

**Table 3** Summary of inductively identified themes and subthemes

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Theme or subtheme
Theme A: rekindled sense of hope
Subtheme 1: positive future orientation (no longer pre-occupied with the past)
Subtheme 2: perspectivity (changed perspective on participants' situation)
Subtheme 3: (rekindled) belief in own dreams and motivation
Theme B: enhanced sense of self
Subtheme 1: self-belief and self-awareness enhanced
Subtheme 2: sense of empowerment acquired
Subtheme 3: self-respect gained
Theme C: sense of commitment
Subtheme 1: (realisation and acceptance of) responsibility for own actions
Subtheme 2: eliciting of deep feelings, profound memories, and healing moments
Theme D: promoting <i>ubuntu</i>
Subtheme 1: confirmation of a sense of connectedness to others
Theme E: self-reflection and reflexivity
Subtheme 1: changed perspective
Subtheme 2: deepened self-understanding
Theme F: change perspective
Subtheme 1: willingness to move forward
Subtheme 2: opportunity orientation
Theme G: enhanced narratability (ability to articulate own career-life story)
Theme H: autobiographicity

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Unsurprisingly, several additional themes and subthemes (see Table 3 below) emerged inductively during this analysis. A three-digit coding system was used to substantiate and reference citations. Data references have three indicators, for example, F, 19, 01, where F refers to Female and M to Male 1; 19 refers to the participant's age; and 01 refers to the respondent number (each participant was assigned a random number between 01 and 24).

***Deductively derived subthemes with participant responses***

**Career Concern.** "I feel surer now that I want to become a police officer, and the information I received should be enough to help me get there". (F, 19, 01).

**Career Control.** "Having learned about the SETAs and the possibility that they may help me become an electrician made me feel more positive about the future". (F, 20, 21).

**Career Curiosity.** "I look forward to finding out more about the 'best' place for me to study teaching and what kind of teacher I want to become". (F, 18, 16).

**Career Confidence.** "We have learned many new skills and I cannot wait for next year. I am confident in myself and my ability now". (F, 18, 18).

***Inductively derived subthemes with participant responses***

Seven inductively derived themes emerged from the analysis. Five of these themes contained subthemes.

**Theme A: Rekindled sense of hope and purpose.** Brief description: A revived sense of purpose in life and hope for a brighter future.

*Positive future orientation (no longer pre-occupied with the past).* “I have learned that it is important to be positive and motivated and to leave the past behind me and keep on hoping”. (M, 21, 11).

*Perspectivity (perspective on situation gained from intervention).* I have learned to depend on myself more than on anybody else”. (F, 18, 05).

*(Rekindled) belief in own dreams and motivation.* “Seeing that there is so much that I can do, so many possibilities that I had never heard of before motivates me to work hard to realise my almost forgotten dreams”. (F, 19, 23).

**Theme B: Enhanced sense of self.** Brief description: An improved sense of who one essentially is; what one’s deepest motivations are.

*Enhanced self-belief and self-awareness.* “Before the intervention, I would always hold back because I did not believe in myself; and my parents are unemployed and extremely poor. Now I know that I can achieve my goals and keep my dream to become a nurse alive”. (F, 19, 04).

*Sense of empowerment acquired.* “You cannot succeed without knowing yourself well. The intervention has given me important information that encourages me to ‘go after’ the opportunities that we learned about”. (F, 18, 18).

*Self-respect gained.* “Always having been poor and bullied does not define who I am. I have learned never to compare myself with others”. (F, 25, 22).

**Theme C: Sense of commitment.** Brief description: Realisation and acceptance that being committed is a key ingredient of success in one’s career-life.

*Willingness to make sacrifices to reach for and achieve a ‘dream’.* “Following my dreams and not the dreams of others for me is what I need to do”. (F, 22, 09).

*Eliciting of deep feelings, profound memories, and healing moments.* “I cried when I wrote about my painful memories, but I learned that my pain could help others”. (F, 18, 05).

**Theme D: Promoting ubuntu.** Brief description: One is only a human being to the extent that one is connected to and helps others.

*Confirmation of a sense of connectedness to others.* “Please share the intervention with everybody, especially poor people”. (F, 22, 09).

*Reminded of importance of helping others.* “I will share everything I have learned with those that are not part of the programme”. (F, 22, 20).

**Theme E: Self-reflection and reflexivity.** Brief description: Thinking about oneself and one's life and realising the importance of drawing on one's reflections to construct one's future.

*Subtheme 1: Change perspective.* "Listening to others and reading my own stories made me understand how important it is to begin changing myself before changing my environment". (F, 20, 21).

*Deepened self-understanding.* "It was difficult to revisit painful things in the past, but I now understand my motives and myself better". (F, 18, 02).

**Theme F: Change perspective.** Brief description: Understanding that change is a key part of moving forward in life.

*Willingness to move forward.* "I now have a new favourite quote: 'Everything we do must help us move forward in our lives'". (F, 19, 15).

*Opportunity orientation.* "I was 'lost' in my search for a career. Now I have found exciting opportunities". (F, 20, 17).

**Theme G: Enhanced narratability.** Brief description: The ability to articulate one's own career-life story. "Everyone has stories to tell. Even our sad stories must be told and used to help and heal ourselves and others". (F, 20, 21).

**Theme I: Autobiographicity.** Brief description: The ability to draw on one's life story. "Having told my stories and shared them with others makes me understand that the answers to so many of our questions are not always as far away as we think but much closer than we think: inside us; in our stories". (F, 18, 13).

### **The two most significant moments during the intervention**

The participants were clear about the two moments they considered to be the most significant during the intervention (that is, when they experienced an internal 'shift'). The first moment listed was the recounting of (and subsequent discussion on) their most hurtful experiences. 'Precious' (pseudonym) put it this way: "I cried a lot when I remembered the day I was raped and what happened afterwards, but I now know that my dream is to become a social worker so I can help other rape victims". The second key moment listed by most of the participants was when they recounted their vision and mission statements. 'Funke' (pseudonym) said the following in this regard: "I am quite a shy woman, and I never thought that I would be able to read my statement to a group of people. Waiting to read the statement was terrifying but hearing myself and receiving such positive feedback from the supportive and sympathetic group lifted me up and inspired me so much. That experience was one I could never forget. For the first time my plans felt real and doable".

### ***Overlap between quantitative and qualitative results***

The quantitative as well as the qualitative outcomes revealed a substantial improvement in the career adaptability of the participants after the intervention.

## Discussion

The research sought to answer quantitatively and qualitatively the following specific questions.

- a. How did the participants experience the intervention?
- b. How did the intervention influence the participants' career adaptability?

The study hypothesis was that the group would demonstrate enhanced post-test outcomes on the different dimensions of the *CAAS-SA*. Below, I first relate the quantitative findings on the differences between the pre- and post-intervention scores to earlier research on group and individual career adaptability and employability counselling, specifically with youths. I then discuss the qualitative findings.

### *Quantitative findings*

The participants' statistically significant improved post-intervention scores (all of them also practically meaningful) on the *CAAS-SA* and its four dimensions confirmed the participants' enhanced adaptive (psychosocial) strengths after the intervention. According to Savickas (2013), newly acquired adaptive (psychosocial) skills should stand people in good stead at this key point of transition in their career-lives when they have to manage multiple transitions (e.g. dealing with the many challenges associated with furthering their studies) and master numerous future career-related tasks (e.g. getting used to new study environments and managing their time appropriately). The findings of the present study are consistent with those of previous studies on the kind of intervention conducted in this study (e.g. Di Fabio & Maree, 2013; Guichard, 2009; Savickas, 2015).

The participants' post-test scores revealed that the difference between the Career Concern pre-scores and post-scores yielded the largest effect size. This finding suggests that the intervention improved the participants' focus on their future, especially their important and imminent educational and vocational decisions, as well as their capacity not only to plan but also take the steps needed to prepare themselves for their future careers. Conversely, the difference between the Career Confidence pre-scores and post-scores yielded the smallest effect size. This finding reveals that the intervention was somewhat less useful in advancing the participants' capacity to complete career-related tasks competently, as well as their capacity to overcome career choice obstacles and solve career choice challenges successfully (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017). It seems that the thorough job analysis the participants had to do tempered their unrealistic expectations that choosing a career and succeeding at tertiary level would be easy (Maree, 2019b). One of the participants commented as follows: "Talking to a nurse that completed her studies at University X made me realise that many struggles await us when we arrive at university and that hard work and dedication will be needed".

The fact that only one male participant participated in Phases 2 and 3 of the intervention was cause for concern and calls for further analysis and discussion. Generally speaking, gender equality is little more than a pipe dream in the region in which the research took place. The women are by and large still expected to stay at home, raise their children, and take care of the needs of their husbands and children. At the time of the study, job opportunities were much more freely available to men than to women, which was probably why only a small number of men initially attended the course. Those men who did attend were able to obtain more clarity regarding their future careers than the women because more job opportunities were available

to men who had completed Grade 12 in particular than was the case with the women. The male participants consequently displayed a greater degree of self-regulation and self-assurance about their career choice decision making and were able to a larger extent to assume ownership of their career-life futures than the women.

### *Qualitative findings*

In line with the quantitative findings, the participants displayed enhanced levels of Career Concern, Career Control, Career Curiosity, and Career Confidence. The themes and subthemes derived deductively and qualitatively confirmed that the intervention helped the participants to self-reflect critically on their situation. In addition, their enhanced narratability and autobiographicity (Savickas, 2019) raised their levels of hope, improved their sense of self (McAdams, 2013), prompted a greater willingness to commit themselves to choosing careers, committed them to actualising these careers, and helped them accept change as a given and embrace it as an opportunity to move forward and make the most of the opportunities that were opening up for them.

These findings are in line with those of other authors such as Guichard (2009) and Savickas (2015). The participants became increasingly aware of the need to identify and utilise their unique psychoeducational as well as psychosocial assets. Likewise, the research supports the more general findings of others who also found that enhanced career adaptation promoted goal orientation and career optimism (Tolentino et al., 2019). Lastly, it alludes the importance attached to *ubuntu*, *isinti*, and *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) in the research context (Ibdawoh & Dibua, 2003; Nussbaum et al., 2010). The participants indicated clearly that the benefits of the intervention should be shared with other people as well.

The education effect of the intervention could be sensed in the atmosphere of respect and understanding among the participants for each other and for their respective points of view. The counselling team, as a catalysing group of health professionals, strove to reconcile often widely differing viewpoints. At the same time, the course facilitators ensured that all group discussions proceeded in an orderly manner. The participants were encouraged to listen respectfully to each other and not to interrupt or talk over one another (Maree & Symington, 2015; Santos, 2004). Career counselling was 'normalized' as the participants realised they were not 'the only ones' with career counselling needs and questions. From the outset, the facilitators were guided by the idiosyncratic needs and preferences as well as the individual programmes of different stakeholders (such as schools, teachers, facilitators, and universities) in our planning of the intervention. We ensured also that a safe space was provided for all the participants to freely express their views in an atmosphere of mutual trust, understanding, and respect and to formulate their subjective identities in their own words (Savickas et al., 2009). In addition, our role involved "the devolution, rather than the provision of the answer (or absence of an answer)" (Duarte et al., 2019, p. 38) to help the participants find and draw on the most appropriate vocabulary to express their idiosyncratic viewpoints. We also promoted the development and demonstration of skills such as flexibility and problem solving.

The finding that the participants regarded the recounting of (and dealing with) their most hurtful experiences and their vision and mission statements as the two moments they considered the most significant during the intervention (when they experienced an internal 'shift') is revealing. The finding regarding the first most important moment (a technique that

corresponds positively with the three early recollections technique, cf. Adler, 1929; Maree, 2019b; Savickas, 2019) confirms Maree's (2016) findings in this regard and provides further (if limited) evidence of the overlap between the two techniques. The finding on the second most important moment is in line with the findings of Duarte (2017), Hartung and Santilli (2018), Maree (2018), and Savickas (2019) on the importance of helping people draft powerful vision statements that reflect their motivations for choosing and entering certain careers. This includes social motivations (in the service of others; the kinds of social contributions they wish to make) and personal motivations (what they personally hope to achieve by entering certain careers). Several factors contributed to the successful outcomes of the intervention, one of them being the triangulation of the data prompted by the integrated (mixed-methods) approach. The triangulation was achieved through data elicitation that integrated the subjective aspects of the participants' lives (their career-life stories) as well as the objective aspects (scores). This approach also facilitated crystallisation through the use of numerous micro-stories to shed light on various aspects of the participants' grand career stories. Furthermore, the intimate life design space provided by the GWF staff enabled the participants to participate freely in a safe and secure holding environment (Winnicott, 1964). Likewise, the presence and support of group members (who acted as a compassionate audience (Del Corso et al., 2015)) gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves without fear of being "criticised or humiliated merely because we talk about our hopes and dreams" (Rose, pseudonym). Thus, an opportunity was provided for them to advance their career-life projects, starting with the mastery of some basic life tasks (Winnicott, 1964).

Another reason for the success of the intervention was the fact that participants who faced major career choice challenges, such as the transition from school to study and work, would benefit significantly from such an intervention (as noted by Rudolph et al., 2017). The findings of the present study confirm those of Patton (2017) and Patton and McMahon (2014) regarding the value of career construction approaches for young people. They are also in line with the findings of Barclay and Stoltz (2016), Hartung and Santilli (2018), Hartung and Vess (2016), Maree (2016), Rossier (2015), and Santilli, Nota, and Hartung (2019) in this regard. The results of the study align furthermore with meta-analyses indicating that effective career interventions often comprise an element of general counselling, that a structured group intervention appears more useful than an unstructured group intervention, and that, in general, qualitative group career counselling outcomes are more positive than quantitative outcomes (Whiston et al., 2003).

### ***Limitations and recommendations for future research***

This was a small study based on a purposively selected sample of participants. The study design also limited inferential potential. What is needed are random, controlled studies in different contexts with groups of varying sizes. It should also be borne in mind that the participants in the present research were highly motivated and that this may have spurred them on to make a success of the intervention. Longitudinal studies should be considered that replicate this research and that include other instruments to assess, for instance, participants' self-worth, sense of self, and career resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Briefly stated, the study confirmed the value of life design counselling using innovative, integrative quantitative–qualitative career counselling with unemployed people (women in particular). More specifically, the results are meaningful in that they showed the positive

influence of this kind of life design intervention on the participants' sense of self, their narratability and autobiographicity, their sense of hope, their change awareness, and their willingness to take concrete steps to realise their reignited dreams. The intervention also clearly led to more adaptive responses from the participants.

The research reported here generalises life design intervention to seriously disadvantaged contexts similar to the current study context in general and to young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years who are neither in employment, education, or training (NEET) (QLFS, 2018; Bynner & Parsons, 2002) in particular—a figure that currently stands at 31% in South Africa. Seen from this perspective, the project described here can be said to promote, at least to some extent, the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development (2016) and Goal 8 especially, namely to “[p]romote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. Moreover, interventions such as the one discussed here could also promote social justice in general in addition to enhancing people's individual agency, especially in cases where research participants have to deal with “the issues and dilemmas of lower socioeconomic status (SES) Black [women] living in a country with high unemployment and informality [especially are facing]” (Ribeiro & de Almeida, 2019, p. 598).

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## **Ethical approval**

The research was approved by the University of Pretoria's Institutional Review Board and conducted in Hazyview. I carefully explained the goal of the research to the participants and obtained their informed consent. The participants' and my roles and rights in the research were clarified, and counselling services were provided to any participants who requested them.

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