

## Editorial

# Career counselling in South African institutions of higher learning in the 21st century: Re-discovering the potential of qualitative approaches

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In South Africa, as in many other countries, concern is growing about rising unemployment. The impact is felt not only on the lives of millions of people but also on the national economy where the required six per cent economic growth rate has not been achieved. A review of the literature on the South African tertiary training system reveals that inadequate career counselling tends to reinforce the low social and economic position of poor and marginalised people in South Africa. Very few disadvantaged students ever receive adequate career counselling at school and often arrive at institutions of higher learning without a clear sense of what their prospective careers will entail. Intervention programmes to correct this situation have not achieved the state's goals in this regard.

Much has been written about the endemic problems in tertiary training that have played a key role in students' failure to achieve and design successful lives. Consensus opinion seems to be that whereas counsellors and lecturers need to be guided with vision and motivation, students need to be provided with adequate career counselling to give them a clear sense of the future, knowledge about what career to pursue, reasons for working hard and realising their potential, and guidelines to help them design successful lives and holding environments.

### **BRIEF THEORETICAL OVERVIEW**

To grasp more fully the need for a changed approach to career counselling in 2012, we need first to understand the shifts that have taken place in career counselling over the past 120 years. To this end, a brief theoretical overview of international developments in the field of career counselling will now be given.

First of all: The basic assumption of stability that underlies current career development theories and strategies is no longer viable. New careers requiring new skills and attitudes are constantly emerging, and career counselling has to keep abreast of these developments if it is to remain relevant in the postmodern world

(Savickas 2006a; 2006b; Watson 2004). Whereas the value of 20<sup>th</sup> century career theory and practice is indisputable, current approaches have become inadequate and no longer serve all the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student population (Savickas et al. 2009). Indeed, the time has come to rethink the generally (and often uncritically) accepted underpinnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century career and vocational theories and strategies:

According to Savickas et al. (2009), these underpinnings ‘[f]irst, are rooted in assumptions of stability of personal characteristics and secure jobs in bounded organizations. Second, they conceptualize careers as a fixed sequence of stages. Concepts such as vocational identity, career planning, career development, and career stages each are used to predict people’s adjustment to work environments assuming a relatively high stability of the environments and peoples’ behaviour ... [however] individual factors such as people’s vocational interests seem to be less fixed than has been assumed in theories of vocational personalities such as Holland’s (1973)’. These authors maintain that careers should be regarded as individual scripts. Each person should accordingly be regarded as the hero in his or her own life drama (Cochran 1997; 2011).

This view is explained further by the career construction theory of Savickas (2012) who explains that people, via their activities in their respective families, create social roles as actors. They subsequently adapt these functions for use on the stages of school and community, and ultimately write autobiographical stories that clarify the stability and consistency in people’s career-related experiences. In a nutshell: According to this approach, three points of view regarding a person’s self form the basis of the new approach to career counselling, namely the view of the self as actor, as agent, and as author. Work is correspondingly regarded today as best used to help persons discover their own identity, find holding environments, achieve self-completion (find deeper meaning in their lives) and make social contributions through their work to help others and themselves become more whole (Savickas 2002; 2005).

To this end, Savickas (2006a; 2006b; 2007a) and others merged theoretical approaches towards career counselling to facilitate the idea of career convergence, which is now accepted internationally. Savickas (2007b, 2) argues that ‘it is important that counsellors facilitate meaning-making as they exercise narrative competence in validating client stories and apply biographical reasoning in positioning those stories in [a] social context’. He adds:

New life should be breathed into career counselling models by examining the poetics of personhood and the politics of work ... [and counsellors should design] innovative methods to help clients shape their stories and attune them to the work world [on the one hand] and shape the story of the career services profession itself by showing how, in the global economy, stories supply a sense of continuity, coherence, and commitment (Savickas 2007b, 3).

## **RATIONALE FOR THIS GUEST ISSUE**

It is clear that career counselling as a global discipline has seen many exciting changes and advances over the past two decades. A shift has taken place from an

almost exclusively quantitative ('positivist') approach to a more multi-method approach that incorporates quantitative as well as qualitative methods of assessment, data gathering and counselling. Increased emphasis on the value of identifying deep-seated, stable strengths as well as motives and of using innovative techniques have become signature strengths of career counselling. However, the key question remains: How can career counselling be tailored and applied to make it more useful to many thousands of students, especially poor and marginalised students, who receive little or no career counselling and are consequently either excluded from sought-after fields of study at institutions of higher learning or lose interest in their studies after having enrolled for particular fields of study?

In South Africa in 2012, it is becoming increasingly important for institutions of higher learning to embrace the exciting developments referred to above. To this end, it is vitally important to identify the challenges that face tertiary training in South Africa, and, more importantly, to propose intervention measures to improve the situation at institutions of higher learning. These institutions should take the lead in equipping practitioners with a wide range of effective career interventions based on 21<sup>st</sup> century developments and perspectives that represent the main schools of thought in career counselling today. The growing global interest in innovative approaches (qualitative approaches in particular) to career counselling – including Mark Savickas' career construction interview technique for career construction counselling (Maree 2010) – should be reflected in these initiatives.

Collectively, the authors in this guest edition have addressed questions such as the following:

- What is the current situation regarding career counselling in South Africa's institutions of higher learning?
- How can the contemporary theories and goals in career counselling inform successful methods and strategies?
- What are the major changes (theoretical and in terms of the actual practice of career counselling) that have impacted on career counselling globally, and how do these developments influence the situation at South African institutions of higher learning?
- Could a qualitative (or a combined qualitative-quantitative) approach to career counselling be employed to suit the diverse counselling needs of South Africa's diverse population?
- Can career counselling models developed in North America and Europe be adapted and implemented in such a way as to impact positively on the current state of career counselling in South Africa and other developing regions, or should we do our own research and develop models that are better suited to career counselling in educational institutions in developing countries? (Sumari and Jalal (2008) maintain that individualism and autonomy, as well as ethnocentrism in particular, may limit the adaptability of Western-orientated career counselling models in cosmopolitan populations.)

- How can we be sure that qualitative approaches to career counselling are appropriate for South Africa? (This includes answering typical questions on their viability in our context.)
- What are the most recent and current international perspectives on 21<sup>st</sup> century career counselling?
- What are the historical and philosophical underpinnings of qualitative, quantitative and multi-method approaches to career counselling?
- How can career counselling be used to promote self-reflection for life designing?
- How can various assessments be used to facilitate students' self-expression and discovery of their identity and personality configuration?

Our contributors, individually and collectively, attempt to promote an understanding of the changing approach towards career counselling globally and the extent to which novel approaches can be applied in the South African context. They also debate the nature of continuing unfair relationships in career counselling at institutions of higher learning, provide guidelines for overcoming current problems in career counselling at these institutions, suggest ways in which the career counselling needs of all students can be addressed, and map out the way ahead. A wide-ranging collection of transinstitutional, transnational, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions that emulate the high standard of previous contributions to the *SAJHE* is presented here. In doing so, we hope to stimulate the debate on career counselling in institutions of higher learning in South Africa.

The ultimate message that is clear from this edition is the following: If change is to be brought about in career counselling in (South) Africa, it will be through our individual and collective efforts. In the words of Margaret Mead: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has' (Meade 2010, personal communication with Professor Tom Oakland).

While reading the articles due to appear in this issue of the *SAJHE*, I noticed commonalities that enabled me to group them under specific themes. The topics all have a bearing on our core business as career counsellors. I will now briefly discuss the contributions in the current issue under the five themes that were identified.

## **THE PRACTICE AND THEORY OF USING A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO IDENTIFY CAREER-RELATED THEMES**

Major changes in the global economy over the past decades have resulted in increased levels of work- and career-related uncertainty. Workers are continually confronted with issues of restructuring and transformation in the workplace. In the leading article in this section, *A (guided) meta-reflection theory of career counselling: A case study*, Kobus Maree (2012) discusses the theoretical base for a novel career counselling strategy that entails guiding clients to reflect and meta-reflect on their

own career-related responses. A case study is presented to demonstrate a strategy that will hopefully assist career counsellors in helping clients choose not only appropriate careers but also use these careers to design and live successful lives.

There have been repeated calls for a combined quantitative-qualitative approach to career counselling, arguing that it is not a matter of one approach versus another. What seems important, instead, is to find an approach that is in the best interests of our clients. In the second contribution in the first collection of articles, *Archetypal life themes, career orientations, and employability satisfaction of higher education students: A postmodern career counselling perspective*, Melinde Coetzee (2012) supports this stance. She explores the constructs, archetypal life themes and career orientations from a narrative career counselling perspective in facilitating students' employability satisfaction. Coetzee's findings confirm the value of a combined quantitative-qualitative assessment approach in constructivist/narrative career counselling.

### **THE VALUE OF A STORIED APPROACH IN CAREER COUNSELLING**

In the first contribution in this section (our first international contribution), *The effectiveness of the Career Story Interview from the perspective of life designing*, Annamaria Di Fabio (2012) uses Rehfuss' (2009) Future Career Autobiography to evaluate the effectiveness of Savickas' (2012) Career Construction Interview with a group of Italian university students. Interestingly, Di Fabio implements a quantitative methodology and, in doing so, eloquently demonstrates how the two paradigms (quantitative and qualitative) can be married successfully in research contexts. This is an important study, not only because of the methodological innovation exemplified here, but also because of the findings regarding the success of the particular qualitative intervention under discussion.

Accepting the importance of narrative and storied approaches to career counselling is no longer a point of debate. In *Story telling, career assessment and career counselling: A higher education case study*, Mary McMahon (Australia), Mark Watson, Candice Chetty and Christopher Hoelson (2012) describe how career assessment can be incorporated into a story-telling approach towards career counselling. Their case study involves a Xhosa-speaking woman who presented for career counselling at a South African higher education career service. Using the My System of Career Influences (Adult) reflection process and a career values card sort within a career counselling intervention based on a story-telling approach, the authors show conclusively how a story-telling approach to career counselling can be used to facilitate a holistic exploration of an individual client's career situation.

In some circles, questions are still being asked about the effectiveness of qualitative career counselling in the South African context. In the concluding contribution in this section, *The effect of a postmodern career life story intervention on disadvantaged Grade 12 learners*, Sarah Tinsley-Myerscough and Joseph Seabi (2012) contribute to this debate by investigating the value of a career life story intervention on disadvantaged Grade 12 learners. Like others before them, the authors find that

the participants experienced increased self-understanding, self-esteem, initiative and hope, optimism and empowerment after the intervention. Given the paucity of research in Africa on this important topic, the study is to be welcomed.

### **QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TOWARDS INVESTIGATING CAREER DECISION-MAKING**

In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, choosing a career and designing a successful life is one of the most challenging decisions in any individual's life. Moreover, many people (including adolescents) experience difficulties that prevent them from negotiating this crossroad smoothly. In the first article in this section, *Gender identity and the career decision-making process in matriculants*, Joseph Seabi (2012) investigates the relationship between the gender identity formation and career decision-making process of Grade 12 learners. The findings indicate that identity-diffused adolescents often fail to engage actively in career exploration. It is particularly interesting to note that no evidence was found of genderised differences in regard to identity formation and the career decision-making process. Seemingly, and contrary to what happened in the past, girls considered embarking on both stereotypical female and stereotypical male paths of career development.

In *Exploring students' motives for studying psychology: A qualitative study*, Pilot Mudhovozi and Kobus Maree (2012) examine black, undergraduate psychology students' main motives for choosing psychology as a field of study and attempt to find out whether there are gender differences in their choice of psychology as a field of study. Their findings suggest that the participants chose psychology for various reasons; in addition, only minor gender differences were noted in the motives for choosing psychology as a career.

### **CAREER RESILIENCE AND CAREER RESOURCES AS ENABLERS OF CAREER SUCCESS**

Higher education learning programmes in psychology and related disciplines in developing countries in particular are often developed from a Western perspective and guided by theoretical and conceptual frameworks that lack relevance to developing country contexts. This has obvious and major implications for practitioners plying their trade in these contexts. In *What we do now is provide service which may be irrelevant to our clients: Imagining career resilience research and training from an indigenous knowledge production perspective*, Liesel Ebersöhn (2012) argues that these practitioners may to a certain degree be impeding (rather than enabling) their clients' ability to adapt and flourish in their (career-) lives. She therefore suggests that institutions of higher learning should factor an indigenous knowledge production perspective into the development of their training programmes, thereby facilitating the systematic documentation of indigenous knowledge-related values, practices, patterns and concepts synonymous with career resilience in South Africa.

In the second article, *Subjective work experiences, career orientations, and psychological career resources of working adults*, Melinde Coetzee and Dries Schreuder (2012) implement a quantitative methodology to assess the relationship between career orientations, psychological career resources and individuals' subjective work experiences. Career orientations and psychological career resources emerged as significant predictors of the participants' subjective work experiences. The authors correctly conclude that the results underline a need for career counsellors to assess the inner career orientations and psychological career resources of employees, for a number of important reasons.

### **CAREER DEVELOPMENT FROM A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

In *The career meaning making of a single high school learner living with a sibling with a learning disorder – A Systems Theory Framework for career development*, Daleen Alexander and Nontobeko Dlamini (2012) attempt to determine the impact of this learner's situation on his career path. Even though the findings may not be entirely new and do not provide a solution or the ultimate answer to our questions about this important matter, it is certainly worth noting the value of studying this phenomenon from a postmodern perspective within the framework of Systems Theory.

In the final article in this issue, *Career development within the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework*, James Keevy, Shirley Steenekamp and Paul West (2012) reflect on the national approach to career development that is currently being introduced in South Africa under the auspices of SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) and the Department of Higher Education and Training, namely the NQF and Career Advice Services. The authors argue for the recognition of the underlying career development theory, invite constructive engagement from both the South African and international career development community and recognise the qualitative approach to career counselling. They also explore the multiple factors that impact on the introduction of a qualitative approach in the South African career-counselling context.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Against the background outlined thus far in this editorial, I want to commend the education authorities and in particular the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, on the recent release of the *Green Paper for post-school education and training* (DoHE 2012). The Paper stresses the importance of collaboration at all levels (basic education and training, higher education and training and the world of work) to address inadequate career counselling and, often as a result of this, unemployment. The focus will be on the needs of the most vulnerable sector of our community, namely the poorest of the poor, who often live in remote areas and are denied access to up-to-date, cutting-edge education and training. The Green

Paper proposes strategies that can bring about meaningful change in the lives of many thousands of people, particularly prospective students and the unemployed. It is truly hoped that the importance of qualitative career counselling, in addition to quantitative assessment, will be realised and thus be introduced at all levels.

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As usual, readers are invited to comment on the different authors' treatment of the topics dealt with in this issue. Let us know whether you think the topics are relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century psychology. Most importantly, feel free to submit manuscripts that address gaps you have noticed in (South) African and other psychological research.

I wish to thank the *SAJHE*'s core editorial staff for their exceptional support and Isabel Claassen for her thoughtful editing of this contribution.

Enjoy reading this issue of the *SAJHE*.

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