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# Effects of life design counselling on secondary students with career indecision in a resource-constrained community

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of life design counselling on secondary students with career indecision in a resource-constrained community. Non-probability, purposive sampling was utilized to select 91 secondary students from two schools (intervention group: $N = 17$, mean age: 18.00; $SD = 1.06$; comparison group: $N = 74$; mean age: 17.41; $SD = 1.47$). A mixed-methods intervention within a pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design was employed. Data was generated using the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale and the Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire. The Mann-Whitney U test and related-samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test were used to examine the outcomes. The participants did not exhibit a decrease in career indecision after the intervention but there was an increase in their curiosity. The intervention should be repeated in longitudinal research with larger samples of diverse participants and different designs and assessment measures.

## Introduction

Many researchers (including Akhurst and Mkhize (2006), Stead and Watson (2017), and Watson (2013) have expressed concern regarding the indiscriminate application of career counselling theory and practice where such practice is inappropriate. These authors have called for more research on the benefits of life design interventions in disadvantaged contexts. Moreover, these and other authors have shown that most of the psychometric tests and qualitative strategies and techniques employed in career assessment were developed in Global North contexts (North America and Western Europe). Few of these assessment measures have been adapted and re-standardized in non-European and non-Western countries. They concluded that conducting research at the local level, such as in South Africa and other developing countries, is imperative to develop models and intervention strategies to address local career counselling needs (Maree, 2020a, 2020b).

Career counsellors worldwide (also in South Africa) are trying to address the challenges that career counselling clients face, despite needing more clarity about what the concept of work will mean soon. Unpredictability regarding the future of work is becoming increasingly arduous because traditional jobs are rapidly fading and employers' and employees' views about the meaning of work and career are also changing (Maree, 2017b). Given that South Africa (SA) is a nation that embodies a multicultural and diverse socioeconomic population, it stands out among countries where variances in career decision-making processes are most apparent. The

significant socioeconomic status and income disparity among South Africa's population groups challenge career practitioners, researchers, educators, and theorists. The complex nature of the work world is characterized by scarce job opportunities, poor working conditions, lack of decent work for many, challenges in making career decisions, and matters relating to social justice. These are all linked to the bigger issue of facilitating employability (in other words, facilitating entry into the job market and switching from one job to another within the context of fluctuating macroeconomic variables) (Watson, 2013). The current study aimed to explore the influence of life design-based counselling on students with career indecision who hail from resource-constrained environments.

## Scripted career aspirations in marginalised contexts

A certain preconceived belief is strongly rooted in the minds of many people who live in townships and rural areas that pursuing academic-based careers will end up in high-paying jobs and occupations that will end their misery (Hlatshwayo & Vally, 2014; Tebele et al., 2015; Van Breda, 2017). This belief means that young people's preconceived education and career aspirations have become scripted into the culture and manifest as something of importance that directs the choices and expectations of a group (Elwood & Murphy, 2015). Most parents and adults living in these rural areas and townships persistently persuade young people to invest in academic and professional career trajectories. Thus, these youths tend to neglect other possible routes that can lead to sustainable and decent employment, such as entrepreneurial and technical-vocational occupations. Studies reveal that only 1% of young people who have graduated with a tertiary degree are not employed (Theron & Phasha, 2015). Statistics, therefore, indicate that success in tertiary-level studies increases people's chances of finding a job, thus strengthening the cultural script of educational and career aspirations.

A cost comes with implementing the script mentioned above (i.e. educational trajectories as an antidote to hardship): young people's success depends on their capacity to provide financial support to their parents. This convention is referred to as 'Black tax'. Young people must adhere to the process of 'Black tax' even though they live in a South African society that sustains structural inequity (Mhlungu, 2015). In South Africa's diverse context, structural injustice is what VanderPlaat (2016) and Young (2015) refer to as tangible and systemic; they predict adverse outcomes, and individuals have little or no control over them. The 'Black tax' convention remains strongly applicable among Black South Africans due to the disproportionate discrimination and marginalization that people living in rural areas and townships have suffered in the past and continue to suffer (Mhlungu, 2015). There is a limit to the career-related decisions that young people from Black communities can make: the responsibility for their families' financial upkeep. This responsibility is associated with increased psychological pressure. Savickas (2012, p. 232) purports that the career constructions of young people from disadvantaged communities sustained by structural inequities are influenced by 'social' expectations'. Concurrently, structural injustices within their communities are obstacles that deter young people from realizing the career aspirations imposed on them.

## Career counselling challenges in marginalised contexts

Career counselling researchers and theorists are better placed to take the lead in bringing about new ways in which career counselling and development can be made more context-relevant (Dalene, 2022). Their contribution is central to attempts to foster the psychosocial resources required to negotiate major transitions in young people and address macrosystemic influences on individual career development. Career counsellors need to modify the practice of their profession in ways that will assist young people who live in marginalized communities especially. This support from career counsellors will assist young people in designing lives that will enhance their adaptability. In South Africa, as in most Western and industrialized societies,

Rankin and Roberts (2011) argue that early exposure of young people to unemployment instils feelings of hopelessness about their future career trajectories. Such feelings are not helpful to these young people, considering that psychological and social resources are needed to make major work-life transitions.

It is crucial to find ways to address these challenges because career counsellors – like other psychologists and helping professionals – are better placed to tackle the career adaptability of young people and challenge realities that perpetuate risk (Acevedo & Hernandez-Wolfe, 2014; Hart et al., 2016). In this regard, advocating career adaptability in circumstances where negative outcomes in young people's development are predictable (Masten, 2014) includes providing the support necessary for people to be able to negotiate different career and life transitions. People will have the capacity to withstand and accommodate career barriers and/or career turbulence that threaten to derail their career journeys (Arora & Rangnekar, 2016). Del Corso and Rehfuss (2011, pp. 336–337) note that "the capacity for flexibility does not reside completely in individuals, rather [it is] formulated and developed through relationships with others. The attitudes or beliefs of family members, co-workers, supervisors, clients, organizations, government and the media influence individuals' attitudes and beliefs concerning career-related decisions". Communities could be assisted to reconsider the way young people are influenced. Providing psychosocial and psycho-educational support to expand students' understanding of current occupations is one way of supporting the community. Another is introducing role models who embarked on diverse career journeys despite structural challenges. In addition, students could be assisted to reflect on their career stories and decisions. According to David Tiedeman (Savickas, 2008), young people should give meaning to their vocational behaviour to understand where they are going. Imposing meaning on career behaviour requires young people to know their own story, which provides them with a sense of identity. Besides identity, career adaptability resources enable individuals to change chapters and figure out how to go about the change. Life design counselling can be used as a model approach to assist secondary students in telling stories, guide families to support students, and guide students to make appropriate choices. Against this background, the following section states the theoretical framework for the current research.

## Theoretical framework

### *Career construction counselling*

Initiated by Savickas, career construction theory (CCT) enhances the interpretive model (Savickas, 2019). CCT focuses on how people design their careers using the narrative or the storied self. Whereas Duarte (2009) believes that personal and career interventions for the current century should assist clients in responding to concerns regarding the direction their lives should take, Rottinghaus et al. (2017, p. 92) postulate that 'interpretive and interpersonal processes explain how individuals construct themselves, find vocational direction, and make meaning of their careers'. Career interventions should seek to fit clients to work environments or careers and understand the interplay between clients and work environments/careers (Savickas, 2005). The process of constructing a career, Savickas (2019) argues, is psychosocial and calls for a certain degree of harmony between the individual and the society in which they live. Departing from Super's (1990) theory of career development, Savickas went on to formulate career construction from whence a new paradigm for careers (life design) developed (Savickas et al., 2009). The following three career-counselling traditions are incorporated into career construction theory.

- Differential approach (focus is on individual differences – mostly on traits)
- Developmental approach (focus is on teaching people to advance following a predictable sequence over time, which culminates in a mature end state)
- The psychodynamic/storied approach (focuses on autobiographical narratives and professional identity)

The three paradigms listed above constitute the main domains of CCT, namely self-construction, career adaptability, and life themes (Savickas, 2019). Cochran (2011) and Rottinghaus et al. (2017) further argue that career counsellors should combine these domains in a story or narrative, which is constructed and deconstructed during the career counselling process.

### Self-construction

From the perspective of Savickas's (2019) career construction theory, 'individuals construct their careers by imposing meaning on their vocational behaviour and occupational experiences' (p. 43). Moreover, occupations provide a mechanism to enhance social integration and contributing to societies. Savickas et al. (2009) claim that individuals' knowledge about themselves (identity) is shaped through interaction with the social environment. This shaping begins from infancy when the individual takes on the role of 'actor' within the family context.

Self-construction theory sees individuals actively constructing themselves through narration or storytelling in social interaction. Rottinghaus et al. (2017) maintain that the interaction (social) through discourse enables individuals to construct themselves by assimilating cultural norms and values that create an identity in the context of the family of origin. The authors say that this identity is further enhanced as the individuals interact in social settings outside the family. The suggestion that individuals' identities are continually unfolding (Guichard, 2009), and that the active construction of the self by conversing during social communication plays a role in shaping people's identities, is fundamental to self-construction.

Self- and career construction counselling (applied to the life design counselling discourse) promotes career adaptability, which enhances career decidedness (Nota et al., 2016). The current study therefore applies self- and career construction theory to the life design counselling discourse.

### Self- and career construction theory applied to the life design counselling discourse

According to Savickas (2015), life design as an approach to counselling is guided by certain principles that counsellors may utilize when assisting their clients in negotiating career transitions. In the process of assisting clients in choosing and constructing careers and designing themselves, career counsellors become more deliberate in their actions to bring about change in their clients, and counsellors deliberately assist clients to understand the reason for doing what they (clients) do (Savickas, 2015). When researchers conduct treatment studies, life design intervention principles help to enhance coherence within the life design discourse. The career construction theory of vocational behaviour in applied psychology (Savickas, 2013) is distinguished from life designing as a discourse.

Whereas the work of researchers such as Cadaret and Hartung (2020), Cardoso et al. (2016), and Savickas and Lara (2016) are examples of research within the Global North context, Albien (2020), Maree (2018), Maree et al. (2018), and Wessels and Diale (2017) conducted their research within the Global South context. The researchers' work from both contexts indicates a growing interest in investigating the benefits of life design interventions. Lopez Levers et al. (2011) and Maree and Taylor (2016) shed more light on the criticism levelled against applying Global North career counselling theories and intervention in Global South contexts. The argument is that researchers working in Global South contexts should do more than adapt and re-standardize certain measures and models from the Global North before they are used in developing countries. Designing and developing strategies and instruments to address career counselling needs in the global South are equally important. Researchers from both the Global South and Global North contexts affirm that the life design paradigm has the potential to assist in preparing and empowering young people from various contexts with skills and knowledge that will help them navigate and thrive in the contemporary world of work (Hartung, 2013; Maree, 2020a, 2020b; Rehfuss & Sickinger, 2015; Setlhare-Meltor & Wood, 2016; Watson, 2013). Savickas et al. (2009) explained that this form of counselling translates Guichard's (2009) self-construction theory and Savickas (2005) career construction theory into practice.

### Rationale for the study

***Research question and hypotheses.*** This study sought to apply life design counselling to Grade 11 students with career indecision from two public schools in disadvantaged communities. The question that guided the study was: How did the intervention influence participants' career indecision and adaptability? The researchers hypothesized that post-test scores for the intervention group would be significantly different from that of the comparison group (higher *Career Adapt-abilities Scale* (*CAAS*), South African Form (Maree, 2012)), and lower *Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire* (*CDDQ*) (Gati, 2011) scores.

## Method

### Participants

Non-probability, purposive sampling was utilized in the current study. The primary researcher (first author of this article) implemented life design-based intervention strategies in which all Grade 11 students at selected public schools from resource-constrained communities could participate voluntarily. Participants had to fulfil the following criteria: They had to i) be between the ages of 16 and 21 years; ii) be secondary students in Grade 11 at a public school located in a resource-constrained community; iii) struggle with career decision making or subject choices; and iv) be willing to engage in the process of life design-based counselling. Grade 11 students were targeted as they likely had many career needs. (Students' academic achievement in Grade 11 is the measure that is generally considered for provisional acceptance at South African universities.)

### Research design

A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test comparison group design was used in the current study to assess the extent of change in the career indecision and adaptability of participants exposed to the intervention.

### Assessment measures

### Career adapt-abilities scale

Participants' career adaptability was measured using the 24-item *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale* (*CAAS*-SA; Maree, 2012). The *CAAS*-SA was developed from the *CAAS* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) and assesses concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (four dimensions of career adaptability). Each dimension or scale consists of six items. The *CAAS*-SA demonstrated good psychometric properties. The reliabilities were: Overall *CAAS*, 0.81, concern 0.56, control 0.63, curiosity 0.59, and confidence 0.69.

### Career decision difficulties questionnaire

*The Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire* (*CDDQ*) (Gati, 2011) was used to measure participants' career decision difficulties. The *CDDQ* comprises 34 items, representing 10 domains placed into three categories: Lack of Readiness (Readiness); Lack of Information (Lack of Info); and Inconsistent Information (IncInfo). Participants rate their beliefs regarding their ability to make decisions for each item. A nine-point scale is used, which ranges from (1) 'Does not describe me' to (9) 'Describes me well'. Cronbach alphas for the subscales were 0.61, 0.93, and 0.81 respectively. Each subscale contains a few specific difficulties subcategories. Readiness could be due to a Lack of Motivation (Rm), General Indecisiveness (Ri), or Dysfunctional Beliefs (Rd). Cronbach alphas for the subcategories of Readiness ranged from 0.46 for Rm to 0.64 for Ri. Lack of Info could relate to the Career Decision-Making Process (Lp), the Self (Ls), Occupations (Lo), as well as Ways of obtaining Information (La). Cronbach alphas for the four

subcategories ranged from 0.56 for La to 0.84 for Lp. IncInfo could be due to Unreliable information (Iu), Internal conflicts (Ii), or External conflicts (Ie). Cronbach alphas for the sub-categories of Lack of Info ranged from 0.66 for II to 0.73 for Iu.

## Assessments

Data was generated from pre- and post-test scores on the *CAAS* and the *CDDQ*. Data analysis was carried out by comparing participants' *CAAS* and *CDDQ* scores, between and within schools, before, and after participation by the intervention group in the intervention. Various statistical procedures and comparisons were carried out in collaboration with the relevant Department of Statistics.

## Ethical issues

The relevant University approved the research. Permission was requested from the relevant Department of Education and the School Governing Body. Written informed consent and assent were obtained from all stakeholders (where applicable). In addition, we obtained permission for the anonymous publication of the findings.

## Procedure

Data was generated between February and September 2020 in the order shown in Table 1.

## Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using non-parametric tests because the scores attained in the scales and subscales of the assessment instruments were not normally distributed. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to establish whether there were differences in the outcomes of the *CAAS* and *CDDQ* between the comparison and intervention groups. To establish whether there were any significant changes between the outcomes of the *CAAS* and *CDDQ* before and after the intervention, Related-samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used. The practical significance of the difference between the pre- and post-test scores was determined by calculating the effect size (r) (Cohen, 1988).

## Results

### Results of the pre-intervention data analysis

In total, 19 different hypotheses were formulated. The hypotheses stated that the distribution of pre-intervention values would be the same across the different groups.

- Hypotheses for *CAAS*:
    It was hypothesized that the Pre-*CAAS* scores would be the same for both groups, i.e.

The hypotheses were formulated for each of the four *CAAS* subscales and for the total. The other null hypotheses are not stated here because of space constraints.

- Hypotheses for the *CDDQ*:

$H_0$:     $\mu$ Pre-Intervention $= \mu$ Pre-Comparison (two-tailed testing)

**Table 1.** Layout of life design-based intervention stages (adapted from Maree, 2020a, 2020b; Savickas et al., 2009).

| Stage | Description and objective | Activities and techniques | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Problem definition and client goal setting | The primary researcher joined in with participants, co-constructed goals for counselling, and elicited participants' transition narratives. Pre-intervention assessment was conducted. Participants completed the CAAS and CDDQ and reflected on their objectives | Participants were reminded that they are the sole experts of their own life experiences. Personal meanings were ascribed to prospective future occupations. |
| 2 | Exploration of the current system of subjective identity forms Reflection and shaping of the subjective story | Biographical information, family influences, and occupational information (career education) were obtained after the administration of the Career Interest Profile (CIP) (Maree, 2017a) (parts 1 and 2) Career/vocational guidance information was attained on the administration of CIP (parts 3 and 4). Reflection and journal entries were made | Self- and career construction was enhanced as participants completed the CIP. Subjective life stories were narrated to foster a sense of self. Reflection on participants' unique characteristics happened during the co-construction of life stories. |
| 3 | Narrating participants' stories in an objective and focused manner to open perspectives | Participants were guided to complete drawings and create a lifeline to enhance their narrations. They were encouraged to depict a person or object that symbolized their current and future career decisions. Additionally, participants were instructed to draw a lifeline projecting into the future, specifically five to 10 years ahead, envisioning where they saw themselves and what they envisioned doing during that timeframe. This exercise facilitated a deeper exploration of their long-term goals and provided a tangible visualization of their envisioned future. | Researchers facilitated narration and discussion of subjective identity forms. |
| 4 | Placing the problem in a new story to give it a new perspective | Life story writing (including chapter titles of the future life story) Drawing on information from previous steps and activities | Researchers assisted participants in constructing new, respectful career-life stories and making meaning of their stories. Unique strengths were identified. Desired identities were realized and linked to the career decision arrived at. |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** (Continued).

| Stage | Description and objective | Activities and techniques | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Drawing up a plan of activities to actualize a new identity | Telling the new story and specifying activities that could be realized in concrete action. Interpretation of newly constructed career decision. Participants were provided assistance in establishing and achieving their goals through a self-advising approach. This approach empowered them to guide themselves in defining their objectives and taking the necessary steps to accomplish them. Researchers supported participants in developing the skills and mindset required for effective self-advising, including goal-setting techniques, self-reflection, and self-monitoring. | Steps and actions were taken to enhance career decisions, crystallization, and actualization (Savickas et al., 2009). Participants were encouraged to engage in actions aimed at finding meaning in their studies, recognizing the relevance of their current learning, and persevering in their efforts to achieve success. The researchers facilitated an understanding that the realization of participants' career decisions would be influenced by their ongoing actions, such as dedicating time to their schoolwork. Participants were encouraged to regulate their learning according to their true potential and maintain sustained effort in tasks such as homework. Additionally, they were guided to actively pursue the careers they had chosen. The participants were informed about the interconnectedness of self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, and the outcomes necessary to achieve their goals. Participants reflected on the effect of their subjective identity forms by considering factors such as contributing to society. Participants were motivated to pursue and undertake the necessary actions required to attain their agreed-upon life goals, which were mutually determined by the participants and the primary researcher. |
| 6 | Long-term and short-term follow-up | Concluding with a focus group interview and post-intervention assessment | Summary and reflections on findings. Reflections on participants' initial goals (stated in stage 1). |

It was also hypothesized that the Pre-*CDDQ* scores would be the same for both groups across the three subscales, and the sub-subscales and the total, i.e. $H_{0:}$ μ Pre-Intervention = μ Pre-Comparison.

None of the null hypotheses for the *CAAS* and *CDDQ* was rejected.

## *Results of pre- and post-intervention data analysis between and within groups*

Statistical hypotheses (38) were formulated to compare pre- and post-intervention scores for both the *CAAS* (10 hypotheses; five within the intervention group and five between the intervention and comparison groups), and the *CDDQ* (28 hypotheses (14 within the intervention group and 14 between the intervention and comparison groups). Pre- and post-test scores for the *CAAS* and *CDDQ* groups are provided in Tables 2 to 7 below. (The significance level was set at 5%.) Eight of the null hypotheses for the within-group comparison of pre- and post-test medians were rejected. These results recorded significant directional differences post-intervention on eight of the 19 scales that were assessed.

**Table 2.** CAAS pre- and post-test scores for the intervention group.

| Subscale | Test | n | Mean (Std Dev) | Median | IQR | p-value | Effect size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Quasi-experimental group | | | | | | | |
| Concern | Pre | 17 | 3.55 (0.73) | 3.50 | 1.17 | 0.224 | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.76 (0.70) | 3.67 | 0.92 | | 0.18 |
| Control | Pre | 17 | 3.57 (0.68) | 3.66 | 0.75 | 0.091 | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.83 (0.53) | 3.67 | 0.50 | | 0.33 |
| Curiosity | Pre | 17 | 3.09 (0.65) | 3.00 | 0.75 | 0.048* | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.34 (0.52) | 3.17 | 0.75 | | 0.41** |
| Confidence | Pre | 17 | 3.37 (0.70) | 3.50 | 1.00 | 0.408 | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.33 (0.90) | 3.33 | 1.33 | | 0.06 |
| *CAAS* total | Pre | 17 | 3.40 (0.47) | 3.58 | 0.88 | 0.118 | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.57 (0.49) | 3.58 | 0.86 | | 0.29 |

*$p < 0.05$.
**: Medium effect size.

**Table 3.** CAAS pre- and post-test scores for the comparison group.

| Subscale | Test | n | Mean (Std Dev) | Median | IQR | p-value | Effect size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comparison group | | | | | | | |
| Concern | Pre | 74 | 3.51 (0.67) | 3.58 | 1.17 | 0.130 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.62 (0.65) | 3.58 | 1.00 | | 0.13 |
| Control | Pre | 74 | 3.69 (0.68) | 3.75 | 0.90 | 0.043* | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.52 (0.72) | 3.67 | 0.83 | | 0.20 |
| Curiosity | Pre | 74 | 3.19 (0.72) | 3.17 | 1.08 | 0.295 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.24 (0.69) | 3.33 | 0.87 | | 0.06 |
| Confidence | Pre | 74 | 3.52 (0.79) | 3.67 | 1.00 | 0.161 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.47 (0.67) | 3.50 | 0.88 | | 0.12 |
| *CAAS* total | Pre | 74 | 3.48 (0.56) | 3.58 | 0.76 | 0.481 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.46 (0.55) | 3.56 | 0.67 | | 0.01 |

**Table 4.** CDDQ pre- and post-test scores for the comparison group.

| Subscale | Test | n | Mean (Std Dev) | Median | IQR | p-value | Effect size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comparison group | | | | | | | |
| Rm | Pre | 74 | 4.44 (1.90) | 4.50 | 3.33 | 0.035* | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.98 (1.90) | 4.00 | 3.08 | | 0.21 |
| Ri | Pre | 74 | 6.37 (1.70) | 6.33 | 2.33 | 0.220 | |
| | Post | 74 | 6.17 (1.90) | 6.33 | 2.42 | | 0.09 |
| Rd | Pre | 74 | 6.80 (1.64) | 7.00 | 2.00 | 0.009* | |
| | Post | 74 | 6.32 (1.44) | 6.70 | 2.25 | | 0.28 |
| Readiness | Pre | 74 | 5.87 (1.27) | 6.03 | 1.86 | 0.005* | |
| | Post | 74 | 5.49 (1.16) | 5.68 | 1.66 | | 0.30 |
| Lp | Pre | 74 | 4.99 (2.31) | 5.00 | 3.67 | 0.344 | |
| | Post | 74 | 5.15 (2.23) | 5.00 | 3.42 | | 0.05 |
| Ls | Pre | 74 | 4.93 (2.17) | 4.75 | 3.56 | 0.435 | |
| | Post | 74 | 4.94 (2.12) | 5.00 | 3.50 | | 0.02 |
| Lo | Pre | 74 | 5.10 (2.03) | 5.00 | 2.88 | 0.201 | |
| | Post | 74 | 5.38 (2.31) | 5.67 | 3.67 | | 0.10 |
| La | Pre | 74 | 4.59 (2.21) | 4.50 | 2.75 | 0.215 | |
| | Post | 74 | 4.82 (2.30) | 5.00 | 3.50 | | 0.09 |
| Lack of Info | Pre | 74 | 4.91 (1.82) | 4.88 | 2.44 | 0.023* | |
| | Post | 74 | 5.07 (1.96) | 5.12 | 2.80 | | 0.23 |
| Iu | Pre | 74 | 4.86 (1.90) | 5.00 | 2.67 | 0.015* | |
| | Post | 74 | 5.49 (2.09) | 6.00 | 3.17 | | 0.25 |
| Ii | Pre | 74 | 4.68 (2.04) | 4.90 | 3.30 | 0.217 | |
| | Post | 74 | 4.88 (1.95) | 4.60 | 3.20 | | 0.09 |
| Ie | Pre | 74 | 4.14 (2.33) | 4.25 | 3.13 | 0.116 | |
| | Post | 74 | 4.63 (2.39) | 4.50 | 3.63 | | 0.14 |
| Incons Info | Pre | 74 | 4.56 (1.64) | 4.44 | 2.30 | 0.048* | |
| | Post | 74 | 4.99 (1.77) | 5.31 | 2.68 | | 0.19 |
| *CDDQ* | Pre | 74 | 5.09 (1.31) | 5.29 | 1.89 | 0.233 | |
| | Post | 74 | 5.17 (1.45) | 5.33 | 1.95 | | 0.09 |

**Table 5.** CDDQ pre- and post-test scores for the intervention group.

| Subscale | Test | n | Mean (Std Dev) | Median | IQR | p-value | Effect size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intervention group | | | | | | | |
| Rm | Pre | 17 | 3.96 (1.50) | 3.67 | 1.83 | 0.251 | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.78 (1.79) | 3.67 | 2.75 | | 0.16 |
| Ri | Pre | 17 | 6.26 (1.75) | 6.33 | 3.00 | 0.088 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.80 (2.03) | 6.00 | 3.17 | | 0.33 |
| Rd | Pre | 17 | 6.66 (1.51) | 7.00 | 2.63 | 0.472 | |
| | Post | 17 | 6.70 (1.55) | 7.00 | 3.13 | | 0.02 |
| Readiness | Pre | 17 | 5.62 (1.22) | 5.39 | 2.15 | 0.246 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.43 (1.05) | 5.56 | 1.60 | | 0.17 |
| Lp | Pre | 17 | 4.90 (2.65) | 4.33 | 5.00 | 0.500 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.75 (2.30) | 5.00 | 2.83 | | 0.00 |
| Ls | Pre | 17 | 4.78 (2.56) | 3.75 | 4.63 | 0.478 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.27 (1.54) | 4.25 | 2.38 | | 0.01 |
| Lo | Pre | 17 | 5.37 (2.44) | 4.33 | 4.50 | 0.073 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.45 (1.90) | 5.33 | 3.33 | | 0.35** |
| La | Pre | 17 | 4.62 (1.91) | 4.50 | 4.00 | 0.283 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.24 (2.01) | 4.50 | 2.75 | | 0.13 |
| Lack of Info | Pre | 17 | 4.92 (2.10) | 4.29 | 3.63 | 0.232 | |
| Iu | Post | 17 | 4.42 (1.47) | 4.38 | 2.53 | | 0.18 |
| | Pre | 17 | 4.84 (1.94) | 4.33 | 2.33 | 0.112 | |
| Ii | Post | 17 | 5.73 (1.86) | 6.00 | 1.67 | | 0.30 |
| | Pre | 17 | 5.28 (1.60) | 5.20 | 2.10 | 0.444 | |
| Ie | Post | 17 | 5.20 (1.77) | 5.20 | 2.50 | | 0.03 |
| | Pre | 17 | 4.12 (1.75) | 4.00 | 2.25 | 0.181 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.03 (2.31) | 4.50 | 3.75 | | 0.22 |
| Incons Info | Pre | 17 | 4.75 (1.31) | 4.82 | 2.37 | 0.144 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.32 (1.42) | 5.20 | 1.62 | | 0.26 |
| *CDDQ* | Pre | 17 | 5.07 (1.47) | 4.78 | 2.79 | 0.491 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.99 (1.13) | 4.81 | 1.53 | | 0.01 |

**Table 6.** CAAS post-test scores for intervention and comparison groups.

| Subscale | Test | n | Mean (Std Dev) | Median | IQR | p-value | Effect size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intervention/ Comparison group | | | | | | | |
| Concern | Post | 17 | 3.76 (0.70) | 3.67 | 0.92 | .138 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.62 (0.65) | 3.58 | 1.00 | | 0.03 |
| Control | Post | 17 | 3.83 (0.53) | 3.67 | 0.50 | .062 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.52 (0.72) | 3.67 | 0.83 | | 0.01 |
| Curiosity | Post | 17 | 3.09 (0.65) | 3.00 | 0.75 | .383 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.24 (0.69) | 3.33 | 0.87 | | 0.08 |
| Confidence | Post | 17 | 3.33 (0.90) | 3.33 | 1.33 | .337 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.47 (0.67) | 3.50 | 0.88 | | 0.07 |
| *CAAS* total | Post | 17 | 3.57 (0.49) | 3.58 | 0.86 | .274 | |
| | Post | 74 | 3.46 (0.55) | 3.56 | 0.67 | | 0.06 |

**Table 7.** CDDQ post-test scores for intervention and comparison groups.

| Subscale | Test | n | Mean (Std Dev) | Median | IQR | p-value | Effect size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comparison/ Intervention groups | | | | | | | |
| Rm | Post | 74 | 3.98 (1.90) | 4.00 | 3.08 | 0.353 | |
| | Post | 17 | 3.78 (1.79) | 3.67 | 2.75 | | 0.07 |
| Ri | Post | 74 | 6.17 (1.90) | 6.33 | 2.42 | 0.221 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.80 (2.03) | 6.00 | 3.17 | | 0.05 |
| Rd | Post | 74 | 6.32 (1.44) | 6.71 | 2.25 | 0.238 | |
| | Post | 17 | 6.70 (1.55) | 7.00 | 3.13 | | 0.05 |
| Readiness | Post | 74 | 5.49 (1.16) | 5.68 | 1.66 | 0.376 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.43 (1.05) | 5.56 | 1.60 | | 0.04 |
| Lp | Post | 74 | 5.15 (2.23) | 5.00 | 3.42 | 0.303 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.75 (2.30) | 5.00 | 2.83 | | 0.06 |
| Ls | Post | 74 | 4.94 (2.12) | 5.00 | 3.50 | 0.109 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.27 (1.54) | 4.25 | 2.38 | | 0.02 |
| Lo | Post | 74 | 5.38 (2.31) | 5.67 | 3.67 | 0.062 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.45 (1.90) | 5.33 | 3.33 | | 0.01 |
| La | Post | 74 | 4.82 (2.30) | 5.00 | 3.50 | 0.248 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.24 (2.01) | 4.50 | 2.75 | | 0.03 |
| Lack of Info | Post | 74 | 5.07 (1.96) | 5.12 | 2.80 | 0.093 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.42 (1.47) | 4.38 | 2.53 | | 0.02 |
| Iu | Post | 74 | 5.49 (2.09) | 6.00 | 3.17 | 0.384 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.73 (1.86) | 6.00 | 1.67 | | 0.08 |
| Ii | Post | 74 | 4.88 (1.95) | 4.60 | 3.20 | 0.227 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.20 (1.77) | 5.20 | 2.50 | | 0.05 |
| Ie | Post | 74 | 4.63 (2.39) | 4.50 | 3.63 | 0.285 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.03 (2.31) | 4.50 | 3.75 | | 0.06 |
| Incons Info | Post | 74 | 4.99 (1.77) | 5.31 | 2.68 | 0.386 | |
| | Post | 17 | 5.32 (1.42) | 5.20 | 1.62 | | 0.05 |
| *CDDQ* | Post | 74 | 5.17 (1.45) | 5.33 | 1.95 | 0.219 | |
| | Post | 17 | 4.99 (1.13) | 4.81 | 1.53 | | 0.05 |

## Discussion

Transitioning successfully from **secondary** to tertiary study presents major challenges for secondary students from resource-constrained communities especially. In this study, we tested the effectiveness of group life design counselling for enhancing the career adaptability and career decidedness of students from resource-constrained communities. The results revealed some noteworthy hypothesized post-intervention differences in several career adaptability and career decision-difficulties scores.

### Research question and hypotheses

The research question this study sought to answer was: How did the intervention influence participants' career adaptability and career indecision? We hypothesized that, after the intervention, post-test scores for the intervention group would be significantly different from that of the comparison group (higher *CAAS* and lower *CDDQ* scores). Comparisons of the findings between pre- and post-intervention scores for both the *CAAS* are related below to previous studies on career adaptability and indecision in group or individual contexts.

### Career adaptability

As mentioned, no statistically significant or practically meaningful differences were found either in the pre- or post-intervention scores between the two groups. Moreover, no statistically significant or practically meaningful difference was observed after the intervention. This result supports the

conclusion reached by Maree et al. (2018), who found that career construction intervention was less successful (from a statistical perspective) at improving the career adaptability of participants from disadvantaged backgrounds enrolled in a public school than the career adaptability of privileged students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, attending an independent school. However, the findings do not align with the conclusions of Cardoso et al. (2022) and Turan and Çelik (2022), as their research indicated that the intervention implemented in the current study positively enhanced various aspects of participants' self- and career construction. This included improvements in their career adaptability and career decision-making abilities.

According to Savickas (2012) and Abkhezr et al. (2021), the career construction of young people from disadvantaged communities reflects the 'social expectations' of their communities (p. 232). The results of the current study seem to support the findings of Elwood and Murphy (2015), who stated that in contexts of vulnerability, young people's educational and career aspirations are directed by the expectations and values of the community in which they live. The results of the current study may also reflect the influence of a script that reflects the expectations of their communities or families that renders career adaptability challenging for the participants. However, it is also possible that there was a somewhat insufficient match between the intervention and the participants' needs. In addition, the study's outcomes could also be pointing to the fact that other outcome measures should be considered in assessing the effectiveness of the intervention and not necessarily that the intervention did not match the participants' needs.

Statistically significant differences were found in the pre- and post-intervention scores on Control and Curiosity within the comparison and intervention groups respectively. Despite the observation of these statistically significant differences, there were no practically meaningful effect sizes in any of the outcomes within and between the groups. Various reasons could be advanced for this, and it might be argued that the composition of participants in the intervention group (16 females and a male) partly accounted for the negligible effect sizes observed. Women who live in male-dominated contexts and who are not recognized as equal to men are often less assertive (Maree, 2018), which seemingly was the case in the current study.

The absence of any practically meaningful effect sizes regarding career adaptability seems to support Panter-Brick (2015). He stated that people's behaviour, who they are, and their attitude towards challenges are powerfully shaped by the beliefs, expectations, and what is of value to the group they identify with. Explicitly or implicitly, families and communities play a role in constructing the thoughts and desires that young people bring into the counselling situation (Savickas, 2012). The participants in the current study were all Black youths who were living in disadvantaged communities, and they were familiar with South Africa's past concerning what Nkomo et al. (2015) described as the reality that 'job discrimination lingers in the collective psyche' (p. 63). Savickas (2021) contends that vulnerable people often do not have concerns about the future and are among the group of hopeless clients who are different to helpless or dependent clients who place their hope in the counsellor and counselling session. The participants in the current study displayed indications of low self-efficacy, as noted by Previarzya and Asmarany (2023). They frequently voiced their concerns about their future and expressed scepticism regarding the potential impact of the researchers' intervention on their career prospects during the assessment period. It can be argued that despite the comparison group's statistically significant pre-test – post-test score differences, low confidence scores psychologically negatively affect participants' concerns about their future.

The lack of positive influence on participants' career confidence through the intervention suggests that their insufficient sense of who they were was also not improved. This finding is concerning, considering Wang and Liu's (2023) assertion that individuals' ability to construct their future and overcome potential challenges is crucial. Furthermore, it is widely recognized that both internal and external factors can significantly impact students' self-efficacy and, subsequently, their ability to make informed career decisions (Previarzya & Asmarany, 2023). Individuals with low self-efficacy often struggle with limited motivation to study or set goals in the absence of a certain level of confidence. Hence, they mostly end up with what Maree (2017a, 2017b) refers to as those students

who drop out of secondary school, graduate with results that do not reflect their potential or fail to learn important life skills or acquire business knowledge. Whereas the statistically significant pre-test – post-test findings within each group indicate that, after the assessment, participants in the comparison group seemed to develop an interest in their future, the intervention group had already started exploring their environment and the options available to them.

The results differ from previous research (Maree, 2019; Maree et al., 2018) in that the negligible effect sizes observed in the pre- and post-intervention differences between groups (intervention and comparison) on the *CAAS* total and all the subscales indicate that the intervention had a negligible impact on participants' willingness to view their future with renewed hope and confidence and to plan appropriately (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017). The participants in both groups – intervention and comparison – expected/hoped to be told what to do. Thus, efforts to enhance career adaptability hardly impacted them.

As mentioned, the findings in the current study should also be interpreted from the perspective that the investigation was conducted in a predominantly rural area where the situation of women is different (substantially worse) to that of women in urban areas. Consequently, the female participants in the current study may have demonstrated less assertive behaviour, less autonomy, and low self-regulation regarding career decision-making. They may not be inclined to take ownership of their future.

### Career decision difficulties

Whereas no statistically significant differences were found in the pre-/post-test scores of the intervention group, significant statistical differences were found in the comparison group's scores in the categories Lack of Readiness (Readiness, Lack of Information (Lack of Info), and Inconsistent Information (IncInfo) after the intervention. Significant statistical differences in pre-/post-test scores within the comparison group were also observed in the subcategories: Lack of motivation (Rm), Indecisiveness (Rd), and Dysfunctional beliefs (Rd). Although statistically significant differences were found in some pre-post comparison group results, the negligible effect sizes indicate they were not practically meaningful. This could suggest that the statistical significance of the outcomes was due to the number of comparison group participants, which outnumbered the intervention group.

The absence of practical significance in the outcomes of both the *Career Adapt-Abilities Scale* (*CAAS*) and *Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire* (*CDDQ*) is consistent with the findings highlighted by Li et al. (2023). Their research underscored the significance of career control in empowering individuals to make autonomous career decisions. Considering that 'career control could enable individuals to make their own career decisions' (Li et al., 2023, p. 322), it is encouraging that the intervention had a positive influence on the participants' career control. This improvement bodes well for the participants' ability to independently navigate and make decisions regarding their career trajectories.

Disadvantaged people (low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals in particular) have less chance of choosing and succeeding in appropriate careers because of their lack of information about careers (Brown, 2002). In such contexts, their perception of their skills and preferences and what is achievable and not may be inaccurate and biased (Gati & Levin, 2014). This was indeed the case in the current study. This finding aligns with the perspectives of Previarzya and Asmarany (2023), who emphasized the strong positive correlation between a positive sense of self and career decision-making ability in their research. It further underscores the importance of self-efficacy in enabling individuals to make effective and confident career decisions. The lack of improvement in participants' sense of self, as well as the limited progress in their career decision-making ability, highlights the need for interventions and support aimed at enhancing their self-efficacy to promote better career outcomes.

The results also demonstrate Xu and Tracey's (2014) finding that ambiguity tolerance (individuals' perception of and response to ambiguous situations or stimuli) plays a significant role in their decision making. No statistically significant decision-making differences were observed in the assessment

outcomes within the intervention group. In addition, negligible effect sizes of both groups probably suggest that participants were low on ambiguity tolerance. As mentioned, participants in the intervention group were inclined to depend on the researcher to indicate the 'ideal' or 'right' career for them, rather than to explore areas for growth. Rigidity of thought and compulsive pursuit of an optimal choice is a core characteristic of general indecisiveness (Ri) and dysfunctional beliefs (Rd) (Schwartz et al., 2002; Turner et al., 2012). The pre-/post-test scores for the comparison group showed some statistically significant differences. Still, they were not practically applicable, as observed in the effect sizes, probably because of participants' beliefs at the time of the assessment. This could also explain why no changes were observed for the intervention group, despite the intervention.

The *CAAS* and *CDDQ* measure constructs relate to career education and how participants should change (adaptability), which is more in line with what Savickas (2021) refers to as 'the motivated agent'. The *CDDQ* explores decision-making concerning career education and the steps the motivated agent requires to prepare for the future. Research suggests that career construction should enhance people's perspectives, predict their career decidedness, and clarify their perspectives (Cadaret & Hartung, 2020; Motlova & Honsova, 2021; Santilli et al., 2019). The beliefs, self-knowledge, and expectations of participants in the current study were most likely at the level of the social actor (one who is lost and alone and needs advice and guidance about problematic issues to get moving towards attaining career-choice decidedness) (Savickas, 2021). However, the current intervention was predominantly about narrating and merging micro-stories and establishing a sense of individuality to help the participants construct their career future and pursue it from the perspective of reflecting on and linking their past and present. Thus, it aimed to assist the psychological self as the narrative (autobiographical) author (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Olson, 2010).

People's struggle to cope with work-related trauma and navigate transitions, such as transitioning from secondary to tertiary education, has been acknowledged in the literature (Chen & Hawke, 2023; Prescod & Zeligman, 2018). These studies emphasize the importance of developing skills and resilience to effectively handle challenges and transitions in the context of career development. Such abilities are crucial for individuals to successfully navigate various stages of their educational and professional journeys.

### Limitations of the study

First: Compared to the comparison group, the relatively small number of participants in the intervention group seems to have affected the outcomes. Second: participants for the intervention group were selected purposively (non-randomly), which implies that it will not be possible to generalize the current study's findings to the South African population. Third: The students who constituted the current study participants hailed from a homogenous background in a rural setting, which raises the question of what the results would have been if the study had been conducted in a resource-constrained community within an urban environment. Fourth Although the intervention group received an intervention that could address the issue of information processing, there was still no change in the participants' ability to make career decisions. This suggests that it might be useful to rethink the matter of the specific assessment measures that were administered in the current study.

Lastly: Familiarity with the context in which the study was conducted could have led to biased judgement by us, the researchers, even though steps were taken to avoid the possibility of halo or horn effects.

### Recommendations for further research, policy, and practice

First, participants from diverse backgrounds should be considered in future research initiatives in small and large groups to further explore the value for and influence of life design counselling on students struggling with career indecision. Second, it is important to consider participants' socioeconomic contexts because some have experienced traumatic events that are difficult to narrate or that can be embarrassing to narrate within a group context. Third, researchers should strive to adapt their life

design activities to be appropriate to the age and context of their participants. Fourth, it is important to ascertain the factors that influence participants' expectations of career counselling. Participants' individual expectations of career counselling outcomes differ and could affect their experience of the intervention. Fifth, research should be conducted to explore how Life Orientation educators address career indecision and how they guide **secondary** students during the career decision-making process. Lastly, future studies could consider measuring other variables, such as self-efficacy, sense of self, and career identity, which may yield more meaningful results.

## Conclusion

Theorists and practitioners in the field of career counselling have, in recent decades, experienced an increase in the utilization of methods to assist (disadvantaged) clients (especially) in drawing on the inner resources they need to negotiate major career and career-choice transitions and deal with challenges of the contemporary world of work. However, much more research is needed in this regard. It is hoped that the research reported in this article will make a small contribution in this regard. The study confirms that a great need exists to examine possible approaches to enhance students' career adaptability to bolster their capacity to deal with career indecision at a time when they are negotiating the transition from school to work or further studies – disadvantaged students especially. Doing so should improve their chances of becoming more career adaptable, resilient, and successful in their studies.

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## Disclosure statement

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