

# Self- and career construction counseling for a gifted young woman in search of meaning and purpose

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## Abstract

This article reports on career counseling intervention for a purposefully selected, gifted 17-year-old young woman. An intrinsic, single-case study approach was implemented. Data were gathered using an integrative qualitative and quantitative approach. After the intervention, the participant displayed an enhanced sense of self-identity and career-identity. Career construction counseling can be used to assist gifted learners in identifying key life themes that can help them find meaning and a sense of purpose in their career choices. Determining the longer-term effect of this kind of intervention and examining its effectiveness with diverse gifted learners (individually or in group-based settings) is essential.

## Introduction

### *Career counseling for gifted learners*

There is general agreement that African schools do not meet the idiosyncratic needs of gifted learners, irrespective of their context (e.g. location and socioeconomic standing) and specific disposition (Maree, 2017a). More particularly, little is being done currently in Africa to address the unique needs, desires, and career aspirations of gifted African learners in schools. This includes their need for career counseling and their need to find meaning and purpose in their lives (Maree, 2018; Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2009; Tutu, 2007). In typical African cultural contexts (like the one in which the current intervention was done), the question of meaning and purpose in life is of special relevance to gifted young learners, whose needs have been largely ignored up till now. Thus, while excellence in sport, for instance, is recognized, and those who excel in sport are nurtured and supported (Maree, 2018), little is being done to meet the idiosyncratic educational and counseling needs of gifted learners. Moreover, career counseling in South Africa, and Africa as a whole, is generally available only to learners who can afford this expensive service. Also, many gifted learners fail to complete their schooling, do not achieve sufficiently high school marks, and do not qualify for tertiary studies, thus exacerbating the unemployment crisis across Africa.

The upshot is that many gifted learners struggle with the idea of choosing a career, and ask whether there should not be something more 'profound' or meaningful than 'simply choosing a field of study' (Greene, 2003). This is exemplified by a question often put to me by gifted learners: "Choosing a career in one thing—to me, it seems as if there must be something 'deeper' to choosing a career." In this context, Borland (2003, p. 47) states: "Turning to the field of gifted education ... Do we help children in their search for the deeper meaning behind the 'Why school?' question?" Wood, Klose, Smith, and Duys (2018) state

that gifted learners' compassion and moral integrity have been noted by many authors and that many researchers, too, have shown that gifted learners grapple with questions such as their 'calling' and how to find 'deeper meaning' (Hall & Kelly, 2014) in their work.

'Making meaning' and establishing an identity and a sense of purpose cannot be viewed simplistically as 'developmental' matters. Rather, they have a spiritual undertone requiring attention during career counseling (Greene, 2003; Pfeiffer, 2015). Greene (2003), Pfeiffer (2015), and Perrone (1997) contend that career counseling should meet not only people's need to find employment but also their deeper need to obtain a sense of direction in their career-lives. Perrone (1997) states that, unlike the 'general population', gifted people tend to remain in one career for life and regard their occupation as an integral part of their identity. An approach to career counseling is therefore required that will help gifted learners meet their need to 'make meaning' and find purpose in life.

While much has been written in European and North American circles about the value of contemporary career counseling for gifted education, little has been written about its value for gifted learners specifically, especially in developing countries. Previous studies have shown that gifted learners often express a strong need for emotional, spiritual, and career counseling, including the need to 'make meaning' and find a sense of purpose in what they do (Colangelo & Assouline, 2000; Greene, 2003). In addition, little has been done to help career counselors in Africa identify gifted learners so that they, in turn, can help these learners 'construct' themselves and their careers in a way that enhances 'meaning-making' and establishes purpose in their career-lives (Maree, 2013). There appears to be a widely held belief that gifted learners do not 'really' require career counseling because they will 'automatically' know what they want to do and which careers to enter (Beerman, Schultz, & Weber, 2012; Chen & Wong, 2013; Peterson, 2009). Consequently, career counseling (as well as emotional counseling) is often not provided to them (Kurt, 2016; Muratori & Smith, 2015), which is certainly the case in developing countries (Maree, 2017a).

A life design theoretical framework was used as the lens through which to analyze and interpret the data discussed in this article. The career counseling intervention discussed in this article was based on life design and career construction theory, research, and practice (Savickas, 2015a, b).

### ***Life design***

Savickas et al. (2009) argue that radical changes in the world of work have caused a paradigm shift away from the predominant rational-logical (positivist or quantitative) approach to career counseling that has been followed since the early part of the previous century. Life design counseling, on the other hand, promotes self- and career construction, which is based primarily on Guichard's (2009) self-construction theory and Savickas' career construction theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2013). In terms of these theories, narrating one's career-life story is a prerequisite for the establishment of a trustworthy sense of self and identity (Di Fabio & Maree, 2013).

### ***Self-construction theory (SCT)***

Self-construction theory (SCT) concerns central aspects of people's private as well as career lives (Guichard, 2005, 2009). SCT is premised on the view that people function as initiative-taking agents who construct themselves and their lives through their interpersonal relationships. It holds that 'meaning is made' through these multiple small-, medium-, and long-term interactions and also through people's past memories and their hoped-for futures. By acting out numerous private and career-related roles, people display different types of behaviors and participate in dialogues that progressively empower them to construct meaning and purpose in their lives and, ultimately, advance their understanding of their sense of identity.

### ***Career construction theory (CCT)***

As a true meta-theory, CCT merges the psychodynamic (storied) approach to career counseling with the differential approach (how people differ from each other) and the developmental approach (which emphasizes the many roles people act out in their lives and their different life stages or phases) (Savickas, 2015a). CCT comprises construction (recounting career-life stories), deconstruction (unpacking or uncovering the actual meaning of career-life stories), reconstruction (dealing with challenges and converting hurtful stories into hope-filled stories), and co-construction (collaboration between clients and career counselors in constructively shaping clients' future career-life stories) (Savickas, 2011a). In my personal experience, CCT is particularly suited to the identification of gifted learners and enabling them to draw advice from within, 'make meaning' of their lives, establish a sense of purpose in their career-lives, and ultimately, make meaningful social contributions (contributing to the common good). Essentially, career construction intervention focuses on the subjective facets (stories) of clients' make-up in conjunction with their objective facets (scores), on a sense of self and individuality instead of a sense of similarity, on career-life themes instead of interest patterns only, and on interventions tailored to promote action and forward movement (Savickas, 2011b).

### ***Blending life and career construction in the life design counseling process***

Self- and career construction concerns the construction of the self through the narration of one's career-life story. It promotes the notion of constructing the self as an internal compass that enables people to manage career-life transitions. Helping people 'make meaning' in their career-lives and helping them uncover or strengthen their sense of purpose in their career-lives lies at the heart of life design counseling (Savickas, 2011a). Some key constituents of life design counseling are discussed briefly in the next section.

### ***Narratability and autobiographicity***

According to Savickas et al. (2009), career-life stories are unique texts that need to be elicited from and narrated by clients and subsequently read back to them by career counselors so that they can listen to and actually hear what their 'advice' to themselves is. By providing their clients with a safe or 'sacred' space or holding environment (Savickas, 2008; Winnicott, 1964), career counselors facilitate narration of their multiple micro-stories

(petit récites) and, ultimately, their connection of these stories to allow key life themes to surface. The aim is to promote narratability (i.e. people's ability to recount their career-life stories lucidly) and autobiographicity. The latter refers to people's capacity to fall back on their autobiographies (career-life stories that offer a proven plan of action and advice regarding how to deal with similar challenges in the future) when faced with transitions in the workplace.

The past few decades have witnessed rapid progress in acknowledging the value of subjective (qualitative) career counseling interventions and associated techniques. Also, more significantly, most theorists and practitioners have accepted and followed an integrative qualitative and quantitative approach to career counseling during this same period.

### ***An integrative qualitative and quantitative approach to career counseling***

Rapid changes in the world of work have led to increased uncertainty and unpredictability in the workplace. This has, in turn, led to a fundamental shift in career counseling away from test scores to 'predict' clients' success in a single lifetime career, towards an integrative qualitative and quantitative approach to career counseling. Many authors (Hartung & Borges, 2005; Maree, 2016a, b; Rottinghaus, Falk, & Eshelman; 2017; Savickas, 2011a; Swanson, 2002) have supported this approach, as it combines clients' 'objective' test scores with their 'subjective stories'.

### ***Rationale for the study***

Much has been written about the value of merging quantitative or 'objective' approaches (based largely on the use of test scores) with qualitative or 'subjective' approaches (based largely on eliciting people's multiple small and larger 'stories'). Yet very little has been written about the integrative approach as a vehicle for identifying giftedness and helping gifted learners find meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives (Maree, 2017a). The research discussed in this article arose from the belief that a case study using the 'new', integrative approach could illuminate the career-life story of a gifted young woman who was undecided about her career and wanted to 'make meaning' of her work-life and establish a sense of purpose in her future career-life.

### ***Goals of the study***

This study investigated how using an integrative qualitative and quantitative approach to career counseling based on co-constructive conversation helped meet the career counseling needs of a gifted young woman.

## **Method**

### ***Participant and context***

The participant, Heather (a pseudonym), was a conveniently selected, 17-year-old, white English-speaking young woman in grade 12 from an above-average socioeconomic environment who had approached me during the first part of 2017 for career counseling.

Since my style of career counseling was not offered in their immediate environment, Heather and her parents drove to my hometown (more than 400 km away) to consult me. Heather felt unsure about which fields of study she should pursue: “I don’t know whether I want to do something more mathematical or something more creative. I very much enjoy art and IT [information technology], but I do not know how to combine them into a career. Choosing a career in one thing—to me, it seems as if there must be something ‘deeper’ to choosing a career.” Heather and her parents agreed that I would implement an integrative qualitative and quantitative career counseling intervention. In other words, both qualitative and quantitative assessments were conducted, and the outcomes were subsequently interpreted in an integrated manner to facilitate self- and career construction counseling (the parents asked for the inclusion of aptitude tests, and Heather was happy to accede to this request). I emphasized the fact that while I would be offering career choice as well as psychosocial and psychoeducational information, she was the only person who could advise herself and whose advice she should follow.

### ***Procedure***

Since Heather lived some distance from where I conducted the intervention, it was agreed that the intervention would be concluded in 1 day (8 h, including a number of breaks). In session 1 (the initial assessment—6 h, including a number of breaks), Heather’s career-life story was elicited, and she completed the first questionnaire while I interviewed her parents. Quantitative tests and qualitative questions were administered/asked simultaneously, and the outcomes were integrated following the assessment. Session 2 (authorization—60 min) was devoted to the interpretation of Heather’s story. After Heather and I had discussed and integrated the outcomes of the assessment, a feedback interview was held with Heather and her parents. In session 3 (60 min), action and forward movement were discussed and arranged. In addition to providing general, psychoeducational, and psychosocial information and recommendations on possible fields of study, the interview included a discussion of Heather’s central life themes as revealed by her earliest recollections and her completion of the statements about the major challenges she faced early in life (Maree, 2013). I facilitated a discussion on the importance of reflecting on her reflections (as indicated by her responses) and stressed that she knew herself better than anyone else in the world. When she asked for advice, I just read her responses back to her and asked her to reflect on them. She was also frequently reminded that her (perceived) areas for growth could be converted into strengths.

### ***Mode of inquiry***

The intervention described in this article was an idiosyncratic application of the integrative qualitative and quantitative approach to career counseling. A single, explorative, descriptive, intrinsic, individual case study design was used, as I was unaware of any similar case studies that I could replicate. In addition, a naturalistic inquiry, situated in an interpretive paradigm, was conducted. It took the form of an explorative, descriptive, instrumental, individual case study in a one-on-one research setting.

## **Data-gathering instruments**

### *Quantitative*

The following psychometric tests were administered: *Differential Aptitude Tests (DAT-L)* (Owen & Vosloo, 2000), and the *Maree Career Matrix (MCM)* (Maree & Taylor, 2016a). I scored the tests, and an external coder coded the data to ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected the data, to enhance the reliability of the deductive process.

The *Differential Aptitude Tests (DAT-L)* (Owen & Vosloo, 2000). The *DAT-L* has 10 subscales: vocabulary (30 items), verbal reasoning (25 items), nonverbal reasoning (25 items), calculations (25 items), reading comprehension (25 items), comparison (30 items), price controlling (30 items), 3-D spatial visualization (30 items), mechanical insight (25 items), and memory (25 items). Previous studies revealed sizable differences in test reliability. Inter-test correlations were used to assess construct validity. The *General Scholastic Aptitude Test (GSAT)* (Claassen, De Beer, Hugo and Meyer 1998) was used as an external test to validate the *DAT-L*. Correlations between the *DAT-L* and scores on subtests and the verbal, nonverbal, and total scores of the *GSAT* ranged from .41 to .96.

The *Maree Career Matrix (MCM)* (Maree, 2016c; Maree & Taylor, 2016a, b). The *MCM* builds on Holland's interest theory and model with its links to (a) the trait-and-factor theory, (b) the developmental theory, and (c) the social learning theory. The instrument was developed and standardized in South Africa between 2002 and 2015. It measures interests and self-estimates of confidence to follow certain careers. The instruments comprise a list of 152 occupations, each fitting one of 19 categories (eight careers are provided in each category). The psychometric properties of the *MCM* are considered good (Maree & Taylor, 2016a). Rasch analysis showed that items in the *MCM* interest scales measured a single construct, and all categories had reliability coefficients above .70. Moreover, test-retest reliability for career interests and self-estimates of confidence regarding aptitude exceeded .70 for all categories. Scores on the *MCM* provide career counselors and their clients with a starting point for clarifying and discussing career profiles in greater depth.

### *Qualitative*

The *Career Interest Profile (CIP, version 6)* (Maree, 2017a; see Table 1) was used to gather qualitative (narrative) data in terms of the narrative paradigm (the *CIP* is a qualitative and not a psychometric instrument). Based largely on Savickas' career construction theory (Savickas, 2011a) and also on the work of Adler (1933) and Cochran (1997), the *CIP* reflects the differential, developmental, and storied traditions, and its questions elicit responses related to these traditions. Because the *CIP* is a qualitative instrument consisting of four parts, it does not have psychometric properties as such. It has nevertheless been shown to be an effective career counseling instrument (Maree, 2017a). The limited quantitative part of the *CIP* (part 2) has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties in South African conditions (Maree & Sommerville, 2008) in terms of test-retest reliability and content- and criterion-related validity. The *CIP* was developed in response to the need for multiple approaches to the collection of data as a preliminary step in helping clients make appropriate career choices and design successful lives. It can be administered on an

individual or group basis. The *CIP* contains a number of carefully and purposefully structured questions. Heather was also asked to write an autobiographical narrative entitled “My life story” and to bring it with her on the day of the intervention.

**Table 1** Description of the *CIP* (Maree, 2017a, b)

Part	Information elicited	Associated career counselling paradigm (Savickas, 2011a)	Theoretical underpinning (Savickas, 2015b)
1	Biographical details, family influences, and work-related information	Career education	Developmental
2	Five most and least preferred career preferences	Vocational guidance	Differential
3	Six career-choice questions		Differential/Developmental
4	15 career-life story narrative questions	Career counselling	Developmental/Storied

### ***Rigor of the study***

Heather was repeatedly asked to reflect on and indicate whether she agreed or disagreed with the outcomes and subsequent inferences. Her comments were meticulously noted and critically reflected on, and the findings were reported in detail. I assessed Heather in English (her mother tongue). The use of qualitative and quantitative techniques promoted triangulation, and in addition, sufficient information was obtained to enable replication of the case study in other settings. Crystallization was facilitated by asking different qualitative questions (Janesick, 2000).

### ***Data analysis***

#### *Qualitative data*

All Heather’s comments and the ‘conversations’ between her and me (the researcher) were recorded and transcribed verbatim for purposes of analysis. Marginally adjusted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was later used to uncover report patterns (themes and subthemes) and ensure consistency across the different responses to the open-ended *CIP* questions. First, the data were transcribed, read, and reread. Next, they were analyzed to generate (preliminary) codes. The codes were then analyzed into probable themes and subthemes, reviewed in step 4, and described and categorized in step 5, after which the research report was written. Drawing on consensual qualitative research (CQR), consensus decisions were arrived at (Hill et al., 2005). By methodically checking them against original data, findings were verified. The specific actions listed below further facilitated the analysis of the qualitative data (Savickas, 2011a).

Heather was asked repeatedly what her responses to the qualitative questions (e.g. her role models) actually meant to her. Repeated words and expressions or phrases were carefully noted. Heather’s own words and expressions were read out to her, and she was urged to listen carefully to herself. I prompted her to say the words and expressions out loud, thereby ensuring that she experienced them as authentic. Heather and I used her responses

to the three earliest recollections question as well as to questions posed in the *CIP* to uncover her central career-life themes. These themes were then related to various fields of study by both of us (co-construction).

### *Quantitative data*

The results of the quantitative inventories were read through carefully to identify common interest patterns (categories and subcategories). The identified categories and subcategories were discussed with Heather to see whether they aligned with her own perceptions of her interest profile. The categories and subcategories were then triangulated with the *CIP* results.

### *Ethical issues*

Written informed assent and consent were obtained from Heather and her parents, respectively, for the analysis and (anonymous) reporting of the research. The research was approved by the institutional review board. In separating my roles of researcher and practitioner (Hay-Smith, Brown, Anderson, & Treharne, 2016), the strategies I used to manage the ethical and methodological aspects of the roles were meticulously planned, executed, scrutinized, and reported. To this end, I oversaw a standardized informed assent and consent process, scored the test (*MCM*), and subsequently identified career-life themes. As mentioned earlier, for purposes of triangulation, an external coder with a doctoral degree in educational psychology coded the data independently to ensure that the themes I had identified corresponded to the data—this was to confirm the reliability of the deductive process. I maintained an open relationship with Heather throughout the intervention by discussing all facets of the intervention with her and explaining the assessment instruments I used (Kewley, 2006). Lastly, I remained mindful that Heather's wish to 'please' me (e.g. by giving me the 'right' answers) may have affected what she told me (either consciously or subconsciously) and took this into account during the data analysis by repeatedly clarifying her responses to questions with her (Sieck, 2012).

## **Findings**

### *Quantitative outcomes*

According to the *MCM*, Heather's highest preferred interest and confidence categories were information and communication technology (ICT); engineering and the built environment; arts; marketing; mathematics and/or accounting industry; social, community services, and teaching; and entrepreneurship (running and maintaining a personal business). The exceptional results obtained in the *DAT-L* confirmed Heather's giftedness as a young woman. This finding was in keeping with her outstanding academic achievements as well as the comments of her teachers and parents.

### *Qualitative outcomes*

Heather's preferred interest categories were information and communication technology; engineering and the built environment; arts (painting, sculpture, and decorating);



marketing; and entrepreneurship (running and maintaining a personal business). Her least preferred interest categories were practical-technical; office-based (administrative, clerical, and organizational activities); and musical. Heather's responses to some questions in the last part of the *CIP* appear below (her verbatim responses have been only lightly edited to preserve the authenticity of what she said.) Due to space constraints, only selected responses are discussed.

In response to the question "How can I be of value, of use, or of help to you?" (Maree, 2017b; Savickas, 2011a), Heather replied: "I know what I want to do. However, I don't know whether I want to do something more mathematical or something more creative. I very much enjoy art and IT, but I do not know how to combine them into a career. But it seems as if there must be something 'deeper' to choosing a career." (Here, she gives clear evidence of career concern.) Asked about her greatest strengths, she said: "I don't get stressed, enjoy practical work e.g. IT (programming), am intelligent, enjoy helping; I am good at art and maths and I participate easily." Her areas for growth were "Learning large textual stuff. Improving my IT theory knowledge. Learning from someone I do not like or respect. I am not good at (traditional) sport." This is how she believed other people (teachers and friends) saw her: "Kind, gifted way beyond her years, well-mannered, highly self-motivated, driven to succeed, and creative—an outstanding artist and forward thinker. She asks challenging questions and solves complex problems from a new and creative angle. Will always finish projects to the best of her ability. Top academic achiever in ICT. Very quiet in class; dislikes group work but achieves outstanding results whether working in a group or independently. Has a sunny disposition. Socializes adequately with her friends, though." Asked what she valued most, she said: "Being able to learn, relationships, and money."

She admired the following people: "Yvonne (pseudonym). Former head girl. She is very bright, strong leader, independent, adaptable, socially adept. An uncle. Showed respect for women, kind-hearted; would always help others, irrespective of what he was doing at the time. Science teacher. Dedicated, self-driven, always cares about others. Never keeps me back, allows me to progress in my own time. Likeable." Her favorite quotations (Heather's advice to herself) were: "Just do it (just do things; never give up; never put your head down). Work hard to achieve happiness (success and happiness are the result of dedication and hard work, not only talent. Not everything is as important as it originally seems (the amount of effort you put into something should be in line with the amount of happiness and money you stand to get out of it). Don't accept the judgement of others—judge everything for yourself (don't take untested words as fact. Investigate for yourself and don't judge)."

Heather's three biggest challenges ('problems') when she was young were, first, the fact that she participated in many competitions and had to overcome much stress. She explained that participating in high-level competitions and also against herself makes her anxious, but that she has learned ways of dealing with her stress. Second, she struggled to make and keep friends for a long period of time. She added that making and keeping friends had been a particular challenge for her when she was young [a phenomenon that is often observed in gifted people (Maree, 2018)]. Lastly, she stated that she was never satisfied; always wanted to improve. If she did badly, she would worry. She went on to explain that she is self-driven and not satisfied with her exceptional achievements (another typical trait of gifted people).

These responses are in accordance with those given using the three earliest recollections technique (see below). Recurring themes included her desire to develop and to learn, her competitiveness, her 'drivenness', her introversion, her independence, her admiration for people deserving of respect, her likability, and her inquiring mind. Her earliest recollections (Adler, 1958; Cochran, 1997, Maree, 2013; Savickas, 2011a) were as follows.

***Vulnerable young woman's unsuccessful search for acceptance among her peers***

"At the age of 5 I was in the playground at our pre-primary school. I remember that I was searching for people I could play with. I went to a number of 'established' groups of friends and asked them if I could play with them, but every time they would all say no. Eventually, I went off and played with myself. I remember how lonely I felt at the time but also that I found a way to keep myself occupied." Feelings she associated with this story: rejection, loneliness, and sadness. "I remember the feelings of being lonely at the time so strongly."

***Excited young girl eager to learn***

"At the age of six, I was sitting in class, eagerly waiting for teacher to tell us when we could read (and looking forward very much to that happening). This is because I would get a new book to read when that happened. Even though that was then, it still influences the way I learn today. That is how I learnt how to study: I just wanted and still want to learn; want to learn and feel so excited about the opportunity to learn more." (Co-constructing her career-life story.) Feelings she associated with this story: "Excitement about learning to read, eagerness."

***Testing assumption/hypothesis about weight loss***

"This happened when I was 6 years old. My cousins and I were dressing up and playing together at their house. We were keen to find out how much weight we could lose. We weighed ourselves on the scale. Then, we did many exercises. Lastly, we measured ourselves on the scale again to see how much weight we had lost." Feelings associated with this story included "fun, feeling energetic, playfulness, and excitement to see effects." Requested to provide an overall heading for the three recollections, Heather smiled thoughtfully and then said: "I discovered that learning and development are sometimes enhanced by social interaction and sometimes not." She and I then co-constructed the following heading: "Development and learning independent of social interaction".

Heather's key career-life themes could be identified on the basis of the qualitative outcomes. Her first recollection provides the background for her career-life story. Eager to interact with her peers, she experienced painful rejection and feelings of loneliness. Feelings of not fitting in and not being accepted are often experienced by gifted people (Plucker & Rinn, 2017; Robinson, Reis, Neihart, & Moon, 2002). This experience shaped Heather's life story. As a result, however, she discovered how resilient and self-sufficient she could be and that she did not need the support of the group to develop and learn (a key life theme).

Heather's first verb is "(actively) searching for". Feeling lonely, she tried to find friends in a systematic manner by approaching various groups on the playground. The action described

here confirms the general theme conveyed by the second and third earliest recollections (i.e. her tendency to examine things, search for answers, conduct research, and solve problems). The first recollection also confirms the theme uncovered by her response to the *CIP* question about the biggest challenge she experienced when she was young (i.e. finding and keeping friends). Heather's second story confirms the themes referred to above. Heather was very eager to learn and could not wait for her teacher to allow her to read a new book. Her third story, which deals with the research design she and her friends devised to investigate the 'research question', namely whether exercising contributes to weight reduction. Once again, the theme is clear: deal with problems (the 'research question') in a systematic manner.

Lastly, I asked Heather how she had experienced the intervention. Asked what she enjoyed, she said: "Being able to reflect on my own experiences through my autobiography and learning from my experiences." (Reflexivity.) She also mentioned that she did not enjoy "Having to think of 'appropriate' life stories." Asked if she had any further comments, she smiled and said: "I got to learn a great deal about myself, even though sitting still for so long was difficult and not nice. I now feel more confident that I will be able to identify and overcome aspects of my life that I sometimes struggle with, and ensure that what I do in my life is really meaningful." (Finding a sense of meaning and purpose in her life.)

Heather's responses to the questions in the *CIP* were discussed with her in depth. She was repeatedly asked to reflect on her own reflections regarding these responses. I took care to point out the 'hidden' meaning of some responses (e.g. her advice to herself as revealed by her responses to the question about her favorite quotations). These repeated reflections uncovered her interests, personality traits, career preferences, and, most importantly, central career-life themes and purpose (Savickas, 2005; see Table 2). Heather and I used the information (co-construction) to identify fields of study that could help her acquire a sense of purpose in life, make meaning of her work, fit work into her life, design and live a successful life, and make meaningful social contributions. Heather was asked several times to reflect on the overlap between the quantitative and qualitative outcomes in order to facilitate triangulation. In fact, together we searched for repeated words and phrases and for themes and subthemes in the *CIP* reflections but also between the *CIP* and *MCM* responses. The quantitative results confirmed the possible fields of study but did not add to the fields of study identified during the qualitative data analysis (see Table 2).

### ***First follow-up***

At the end of the feedback session, I recommended that she return home, conduct a thorough job analysis, carefully weigh options for finding an appropriate outlet for her talents, and report back to me if and when she wanted to. Four months after the initial sessions, Heather commented that "the intervention was great, and I can now choose a career 'path' with confidence from the sessions. She reported that she had, for instance, spent some time at the IT division of some banks. Six months after the initial sessions, after having conducted careful, additional job analysis, which included spending time in the design department of the same bank, she commented "My job analysis incorporated varying degrees of mathematics and creativity. I discovered that all areas were interesting in their own regard, and I would enjoy any or a combination of all the fields."

**Table 2** Integrated career-life themes and related study fields

Identified career-life themes	Associated study fields	Data sources	
		Qualitative	Quantitative
A. Interest patterns	Information or interior design	<i>CIP</i>	<i>MCM</i>
1. Arts (painting, sculpture, and decorating)	Textile design Architecture	“My life story”/ reflections/ meta-reflections	
2. Practical-creative and consumer science	Landscape architecture Interior architecture		
3. Medical and/or paramedical services	Construction management Industrial design	Earliest recollections	
4. Adventure, plants, animals and the environment	Veterinary science Photography		
5. Marketing	Film and media production		
6. Word artistry	Digital art (game design)		
7. Information communication technology	Performing and visual art (game design)		
B. Artistic inclination			
1. Creativity			
2. Sense of being different			
3. Dreamer			
4. Love for drawing			
5. Rejection of set routine			
6. Exceptional sense of humour			
C. Inquisitiveness	Journalism		<i>MCM</i>
1. Exploring nature	Law		
2. Curiosity			
3. Sense of fairness			

Identified career-life themes	Associated study fields	Data sources	
		Qualitative	Quantitative
D. Unconventionality	See (A)	<i>CIP</i> , “My life story”	
1. Own style (uniqueness)			
2. Desire for ‘freedom’			
3. Hatred of monotony, ‘set rules’			
4. Self-sufficient			
5. Future orientation			
E. Insecurity			
1. Grew up protected			
2. Was often left alone (“ <i>A common theme in my life</i> ”)			
3. Unwilling to leave comfort zone			
4. Moved around often, having to make new friends repeatedly			
5. Hesitant			
6. Overcautious			
F. Brightness		School reports; teacher comments	
1. Academic excellence			
2. ‘Unreadable’; deep thinker			

## ***Second follow-up***

Eight months after the initial sessions, Heather stated that “the job analysis has helped me discover that it is possible to live my dream in any of a given number of related fields and mean something to other people while living this dream. The intervention encouraged me to think about the choice a lot more deeply, take into consideration my strengths but especially my intentions. I thought a lot about my first ‘recollection’ and our discussion about it and realize how important it is to me to make use of my influence to help vulnerable people, people that are ‘ignored’ by society.”

## **Discussion**

This article has focused on the value of applying life and career construction to the life design counseling process for a gifted young woman who had expressed a need for career counseling. Because ‘traditional’ career counseling theory may not provide the right foundation for career counseling for gifted learners, especially in today’s rapidly changing world of work, an integrative qualitative and quantitative approach to career counseling based on co-constructive conversation was followed. The aim was to examine how an integrative approach could help a client seeking career counseling also find meaning and purpose.

After the intervention, the participant (Heather) displayed an enhanced sense of self-identity and career-identity and an improved perspective on how to ‘make meaning’ of her career choice situation and find a sense of purpose (*What do I really want to do, and, especially, why do I want to do that? What is the real purpose of my life?*) (Maree, 2017a; Hall & Kelly, 2014). This development in the participant supports the view that people’s career-life identities, as ‘living narratives’, are likely to help give meaning and value to their life pursuits (Ricoeur, 1988; McAdams, 1996; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2017). It is also consistent with Ashforth and Schinoff’s (2016) argument that career-life identities symbolize and define people’s sense of self. The participant was able to recount her life story clearly and drew on her autobiography to advise herself regarding her future career options. Her uncertainty gave way to a sense of security, and she realized the importance of not simply choosing a career ‘to make a living and money’, but rather, choosing a field of study and career that would make her employable, give meaning to her career-life, establish a sense of purpose in her future career, and enable her to ‘hold’ herself in the workplace. She also realized the importance of being able to provide a holding environment for others less fortunate than herself. This confirms the finding that addressing people’s needs to establish a sense of purpose in life and to ‘make meaning’ is an important precondition for helping them link their perception of their life purpose with their work-related actions (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

The findings of the research discussed in this article confirm Chen and Wong’s (2013, p. 124) view that “[b]ridging career development and counseling theories (i.e., career theories) to the career exploration needs of gifted students may provide a more comprehensive picture to enhance further understanding of the target group.” Consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Maree, 2016a, b), the present research points to the inseparability of career and personal counseling (Miller, 2009; Sharf, 2013) and confirms the view that career

counselors should above all endeavor to link gifted learners' reasons for requesting career counseling with their overall search for meaning and purposefulness.

Merging career counseling paradigms and drawing on 'stories' and 'scores' provides career counseling practitioners with a theoretically sound and practically useful framework for career counseling interventions with gifted learners who present with 'meaning' and 'purpose of life' problems (Savickas, 2016). The findings reported here support the research findings of Hartung (2015) and Masdonati, Massoudi, and Rossier (2009), who established the value of individual career counseling in helping counsees and their career counselors resolve career counseling and choice-related challenges (Heppner et al., 1998). Peng and Chen's (2014) finding on the role of a sense of purpose in career indecision is confirmed as well. These authors argue that career indecision is moderated once counsees obtain clarity regarding their spiritual beliefs, their purpose in life, and what constitutes meaning in life. Greene's (2003) argument that "[c]areer counseling for the gifted should be an action-oriented and constructivist process and should not be considered in isolation, but in relationship to other aspects of life" (p. 70) is also supported by the current findings. The findings also show the value of career construction counseling (in the manner described in this article) in promoting self-reflection in a gifted young South African woman in search of meaning and purpose in life, as well as the importance of an individualized approach to career counseling. However, longitudinal research (with groups and individuals) in diverse contexts is needed to give added weight to the findings. It should also be noted that the participant's strong motivation to consult me may have played a significant role in the 'success' of the intervention. The fact that she was impressed with the 'new' style of career counseling seemed to encourage her to become more involved in the process and to collaborate more readily.

The entire intervention took place on the same day, although a key element of the narrative approach is the time generally allowed for reflection between sessions and the 'incubation' period, which enables 'deeper' content to emerge. I also did most of the data collection on the same day, which gave me less time to take a step back to reflect on the findings. As mentioned earlier, for practical reasons, it was not possible to see Heather on different days. While this did not invalidate the intervention process, the intervention style described here was unusual. Nevertheless, the reflexive process that Heather underwent during the day clearly seemed to have been sufficient.

Lastly, I was indeed somewhat surprised by the positive outcomes of the intervention, and I again realized the importance of providing information of various kinds (general, psychoeducational, psychosocial, and career counseling-related), but in the end leaving it up to individual clients to reflect on what they had learned from the counseling before making a career decision. If I were to redo the intervention with the same participant, I would dispense with the aptitude test and interview her and her parents over three different sessions to allow ample time for reflection and meta-reflection.

### ***Limitations***

My personal perspectives, my own idiosyncratic style, my bias towards people from minority groups in general and gifted people in particular (I served as the African delegate to

the World Council of Gifted and Talented Children for a number of years), and my deep involvement in the topic may have influenced me during the course of this career counseling intervention. Other researchers may interpret the same data differently, arrive at different findings, and draw different conclusions. Likewise, the participant's idiosyncratic perceptions, beliefs, and insights may not be 'typical' of those of other gifted young women in South Africa, especially as South Africa is an extremely diverse country with many different subcultures. Lastly, because of the paucity of scientific literature on the topic in Africa, I had to rely largely on European and North American sources. Test development in South Africa and in Africa at large has unfortunately always lagged that in the developed world. African countries in general are not the typical contexts where new developments in career counseling occur and are applied.

## **Conclusion**

The career counseling intervention for gifted learners described here can help develop knowledge about the value of such an integrative qualitative and quantitative approach. It can also deepen our knowledge about the idiosyncratic career concerns of talented young people. The approach should be researched further because of its potential to curtail the loss of countless people who could contribute to the resolution of many of the problems confronting the world today. The present article indicates that the 'new' approach may be a suitable way of meeting the career counseling needs of gifted learners. It can help career counselors identify the potential and needs of gifted learners and also promote authoring of their career-life stories in a way that can assist them in choosing and constructing careers and themselves and in designing successful lives in which they can make meaningful social contributions. Career counselors should therefore be trained to help gifted learners and themselves listen 'for' (instead of 'to') learners' career-life stories in their quest to help learners 'make meaning' of their lives (Savickas, 2016; Welty, 1998). This should promote these learners' ability to make sense of who they are and 'why they are here'. From an educational-psychological perspective, this is urgent and crucial. From a constitutional and children's rights perspective, this will meet the rights of all gifted learners.

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