

# **Innovating and contextualising career counselling for young people during the Covid-19 pandemic**

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on how the changing career counselling needs of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic can be met. It is argued that innovative and contextualised career counselling that is in line with the basic principles of ‘best practice’ and draws on a life design–based framework offers a viable conceptual framework for this kind of endeavour. Such counselling can promote young people’s adaptability; enhance their employability; and bolster their narratability, narrativity and autobiographicity. A brief theoretical overview explains innovation and contextualisation in career counselling and clarifies key aspects of counselling for self- and career construction. The style of e-career counselling advocated here can help young people make meaning of their career-lives and (re-)kindle their sense of hope and purpose. Moreover, it can help them devise practicable strategies to actuate their sense of purpose and hope and also help them experience a sense of being part of something much bigger than themselves. In addition, it can promote young people’s entrepreneurship and self-entrepreneurship and bolster their employability. Longitudinal research, including qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies on the topic, is needed to examine the value of the e-career counselling approach. Such research could involve different assessment instruments and counselling strategies and include questionnaires to facilitate pre- and post-assessment of the effectiveness of the approach.

**Keywords:** Adaptability, COVID-19 pandemic, e-career counselling, employability, innovating and contextualising career counselling, young people

A. Phillips (2020) argues that global pandemics often expose fundamental deficiencies and structural imperfections in societies. In addition to its effect on people’s health, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world of work fundamentally and irrevocably. Millions of people, young persons especially, have already lost their work, and millions more may suffer the same fate in the future (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Millions of low-income workers, mostly young people, defined for the purposes of this article as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (United Nations, 2021), are especially vulnerable (Kassid, 2020). In fact, an International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020) report states that ‘[a]cross the globe, young people are being disproportionately affected, particularly in the world of work’ (Guterres, in ILO, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, it seems that their situation deserves special attention.

According to Kassid (2020), the unemployment rate among the youth globally is three times that of the adult rate (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2019). Even before the pandemic, 20% of all young adults (67.7% of them women) were not in employment, education or training (NEETs), and the situation has grown worse. The situation

of workers and work-seekers in Global South countries in particular has deteriorated markedly. In Global North contexts, especially, 'fixed' hierarchical occupational structures were disappearing rapidly even before the pandemic. Erstwhile 'safe' work contexts were no longer there to provide safe and secure 'holding environments' for workers (Winnicott, 1987).

The pandemic's impact on young people's emotional-social health and well-being has been huge. Individually and collectively, they have experienced and continue to experience an existential crisis and are struggling to adapt to what is referred to as the 'new normal'. Their health, socioeconomic situation, anxiety and stress levels, motivational levels, and sense of purpose and hope have all been negatively affected (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Their sense of having little control over their present circumstances and their longer term future is enervating them psychologically (L. Phillips, 2020). The education and training of young people have been impacted at all levels (Brown, 2020). Some commentators suggest that the pandemic may result in another 'lost generation'. According to Greenfeld (2020), 'Theirs may not be a Lost Generation . . . but it is certainly a cohort that shares a powerful, defining universal experience' (p. 1).

Scant research has been done on the impact of Covid-19 on career counselling and, especially, the contextualisation of career counselling to address the changing career counselling needs of young people during the pandemic (disadvantaged students in particular). The situation in low- and middle-income countries, in particular, should be a source of concern for career counselling researchers, practitioners and policy makers. The provision of online career counselling has become widespread in more affluent communities during the pandemic, unlike in less affluent, disadvantaged communities. A need exists now for the conceptualisation and implementation of guidelines for addressing the changing career counselling needs of young people during the pandemic. Also, efforts should be speeded up to provide career counselling for all young people who need it to help them successfully navigate the transitions that will occur in their career-life journeys. More specifically, clarification is required on how career counselling can be innovated and contextualised to address the changing career counselling needs of young people during (and probably after) the pandemic. This article examines how career counselling can best be innovated and contextualised during (and probably even after) the pandemic in a way that meets the changing career counselling needs of young people from different cultures and at the same time advances scholarly debate on the subject.

### **The pandemic as a generator of innovation in career counselling**

Career counsellors realised that they had to acquire the skills needed to facilitate individual and group career counselling online. These skills included the ability to conduct online assessment and to provide online feedback to young people. Complex demographic challenges and pressures heightened the need for group online career counselling, especially when social distancing became the 'new normal'. The dearth of online assessment instruments to achieve this aim was exposed and the need realised for online career counselling in Global South contexts in particular (especially in groups) (Maree, 2020; Pillay, 2020). This required the ability to draw on digital communication and conferencing platforms such as Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, YouTube and Blackboard.

Career counsellors need to understand and accept that while their ostensible goals are to provide basic information (vocational guidance) to young people, to offer psychosocial and

psychoeducational support (career guidance and education), and (at the highest level) to administer self- and career construction (life designing), their ultimate goal is to rekindle a sense of purpose and hope in people and to devise strategies to convert hoping into acting. This should be borne in mind whenever e-career counselling is administered. For the purposes of this article, e-counselling is regarded as either

- i. synchronous (in other words, in real time, face time or audio) or
- ii. asynchronous (when there are delays such as using email or messaging to ask questions, receiving email responses, reflecting using the written word).

The nature of e-counselling will depend on the context in which the counselling is provided.

### **Contextualising career counselling**

Contextualisation here implies that career counselling intervention can be regarded as scientifically accountable only if there is sufficient understanding, appreciation and consideration of all facets of the context in which such intervention takes place. Aspects of intervention that should be contextualised include intervention styles, the process of intervention and content. This includes considering generally held beliefs and assumptions in given communities. From an African perspective, the following beliefs and views should be borne in mind before and during any intervention: First, the strong African emphasis on the collective needs of people (such as dignity, humanity and respect for others [*Ubuntu* and *iSinti*]) (Nussbaum et al., 2010). Second, the importance of meeting the needs of the extended family and the African belief that other people strongly influence who individuals eventually become (*Ujamaa*) (Cranford, 1999; Ibdawoh & Dibua, 2003). Third, the African narrative tradition (narration) of telling stories, which subsumes the needs of individuals in the collective needs of the group.

### **Searching for a contextually relevant approach to career counselling**

Savickas (1993) reminds us that counselling approaches should ‘fit the spirit of the age, if clients are to accept them as useful’ (p. 207). Career counselling should be made available to and meet the unique needs of all people (across the diversity spectrum, catering for people in individual and large-group contexts) who are able and willing to work – not just a select few. By this, it is not meant that ‘one single approach’ (Bassot, 2015, p. 307) will work for everyone. Instead, career counselling professionals should strive towards devising an up-to-date, contextualised approach that will enable career counsellors to meet the career counselling needs of all people, irrespective of their unique circumstances and identity. In other words, career counselling professionals should not pay allegiance to any particular theoretical orientation, intervention or assessment strategy (Phares, 1992). Rather, they should be guided by the best interests of their clients. If, for example, a newer and more contextually relevant approach (with associated interventions and assessment instruments) is developed in a given context, clients should be granted access to such an approach.

It is important to contextualise (which includes recontextualising or resituating) and co-contextualise (abandoning preconceived ideas and drawing on the expert input from knowledgeable people in different contexts) e-career counselling continually in a way that helps clients achieve their idiosyncratic work and employment dreams, hopes and ambitions. The following observations demonstrate the need for contextualisation:

- i. Trait-and-factor-based career counselling (vocational guidance) held sway early in the previous century. That was a time when thousands of new jobs became available and there was a need to ‘test’ people and ‘tell’ them which working environments would ‘fit’ their personalities. However, today the situation is quite different. Millions of jobs have been lost, and working environments are no longer ‘holding’ (Winnicott, 1964) workers – the pendulum has swung from finding work to becoming employable.
- ii. People today need to narrate and draw on their autobiographies for advice on the kind of work that may help them ‘make meaning’ of and rediscover a sense of purpose and hope in the new world of work. We therefore need to accept and draw on qualitative approaches (in addition to quantitative approaches) to help people elicit their key life themes, clarify their identities and become employable. What is called for is the development of contemporary qualitative assessment strategies and associated instruments.
- iii. Providing in-person career counselling has been the norm for many decades. However, for various reasons (including the restrictions imposed on interpersonal, face-to-face communication as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic), online assessment and career counselling from modern digital platforms have become essential.
- iv. In-person career counselling remains the preferred mode of counselling for many people, especially in the Global North contexts (characterised by wealth, ageing populations, political stability, technological development and access to multiple resources). However, in the Global South contexts (characterised by economic disadvantage, low average income, underdevelopment, political instability and cultural marginalisation), the need for group-based career counselling has grown exponentially. This kind of counselling should be state-funded and made available to the poor in the remotest regions, irrespective of their work or domestic situation.

To sum up: All career counselling assessments and associated interventions should therefore be contextualised, reconceptualised (updated, amended, adjusted, modified and appropriately adapted) and co-contextualised (changes to existing strategies and assessment instruments should always be made in consultation with ‘local’ people). Existing interventions that are adapted for use in different contexts should consider factors such as people’s age, beliefs, ethnicity, health status, geographic location, intellectual capacity and socioeconomic situation.

The following explanation highlights how career counsellors can use counselling for self- and career construction as a theoretical platform to help prospective workers rekindle their sense of mission and vision during (and perhaps even after) the pandemic.

## **Counselling for self- and career construction**

### ***Self-construction theory***

Guichard’s (2005) self-construction theory (SCT) relates to human construction in general and not primarily to career construction. It holds that people’s identities unfold continuously through narratives that occur in the course of social interactions and conversation. It relates to intervention dynamics in career construction theory and how people reconstruct their changeable identities and obtain stable, consistent and authenticated identities. It relates to how people answer the following questions: ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where am I going?’ ‘Why do I

live and work?’ and ‘What is the meaning and purpose of my life?’ (Guichard, 2005). Self-construction thus concerns the central aspects of people’s personal development.

### ***Career construction theory***

Career construction theory holds, among other things, that language is an ideal instrument to help people make or reconstruct (rather than ‘find’) meaning, purpose and hope (Hartung, 2018; Savickas, 2005, 2019). It is a ‘grand’, inclusive theory on vocational and/or career choice and behaviour.

### **Key aspects of career construction counselling**

Cardoso et al. (2019) state that ‘[t]he fundamental goal of CCC is to enable clients to enact career change in the real world by first constructing new plans that elaborate their career themes and reconstruct a narrative identity with greater coherence and continuity’ (p. 189). Career construction counselling (CCC) helps people narrate and draw on their own life stories (autobiographies) to construct their careers (Savickas, 2005; Savickas in Arthur, 2020). Eliciting their evolving life stories helps them clarify the subjective meaning of these stories and attain a clearer sense of self (Savickas, 2005, 2015a, 2015b). CCC facilitates dynamic, action-oriented interventions and assessments that help people connect current understandings and insights with subconscious insights to enact educed key life themes in their careers. CCC helps people construct an ‘autobiographical bridge’ that connects past experiences, present aspirations and challenges, and future career-lives to equip them with the proficiency to navigate repeated career-life transitions successfully (Savickas, 2019). Hartung (2013) explains that CCC bolsters *narrativity* (narrating one’s stories) and ‘emphasizes *narratability* to tell one’s story coherently, adaptability to cope with changes in self and situation, and intentionality to design a successful life’ (p. 11). CCC thus helps people *identify life themes or key patterns of personal meaning*, enabling career counsellors to work collaboratively with clients to construct, deconstruct, reconstruct and co-construct hope- and purpose-filled career-life stories.

With the revelation of these stories, action and forward movement in people’s career-lives are advanced and their self-awareness, self-reflection and reflexivity enhanced. These actions actuate the shaping and fine-tuning of their sense of self and identity and equip them with a clear, proven plan of action to face an uncertain future (LaPointe, 2010; Savickas, 2019). At the same time, their career adaptability, adaptivity, career resilience and employability are promoted – key proficiencies needed during the current pandemic especially.

### **Using e-health in psychological interventions**

While the pandemic cannot alone be credited with the upsurge in the use of e-health in psychological interventions in general, and its use in career counselling in particular, the pandemic certainly necessitated and promoted e-health’s use in such interventions. E-counselling has grown moderately across the African continent where people have had very little if any exposure to it. At the onset of the pandemic, in-person counselling was severely restricted and stringent guidelines and measures were introduced to curb the spread of the virus (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2020b) and to professionalise the administration of all e-health interventions. The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) too has endorsed telepsychology guidelines, which can be found on their website (Evans, 2018). While the need for e-career counselling has declined in private practice, one-

on-one contexts, this has not been the case in group contexts. However, basic safety measures such as social distancing, wearing face masks and sanitising are still in place in most contexts and will remain so for some time to come.

### **E-career counselling (tele-career counselling)**

For the purposes of this article, e-counselling refers to an internet-based counselling service that is provided via digital or video communication, interaction and collaboration platforms. Examples of such platforms are Google hangouts, Blackboard collaborate, ClickDoc and Microsoft Teams. The broad guidelines outlined in the article apply to in-person, online, blended and hybrid career counselling.

Confusion reigned initially as to whether career counselling was ‘an essential service’ but was eventually allowed during Level 5 of the national lockdown. More clarity on what activities would be allowed was provided in the *Regulations issued in terms of section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act 2002* (HPCSA, 2020a). This document states, ‘All social work, counselling, services supporting the prevention of gender-based violence, care and relief activities [are] permitted’ (p. 27). Although these guidelines specified well-defined procedures and boundaries within which professionals had to practise, they did not spell out clearly how these guidelines should be enacted in real-life contexts. Matters such as the following needed to be clarified and communicated to all stakeholders by experts in the field:

- i. Facilitating e-career counselling to meet the basic principles of ‘best practice’ in career counselling during the pandemic.
- ii. Some of the main similarities and differences between in-person and e-career counselling.
- iii. Some of the main similarities and differences between individual and group e-career counselling.

Chandler (2020) states that ‘teletherapy, telecounseling, telemental health and distance counseling – among other descriptives used to define the provision of remote mental health psychotherapy – takes a slightly different way of working with clients than does providing in-person sessions’ (p. 2). Best practice in the administration of career counselling can occur only if practitioners adhere to key, science-based practice guidelines. To promote consistency in the provision of e-career counselling in the different contexts referred to in this article, more information on these three matters is given below.

#### ***Facilitating e-career counselling to meet the basic principles of ‘best practice’ in career counselling during the pandemic***

The fundamental principles that govern career counselling are independent of the mode of delivery. The aim of e-counselling should not only be to provide useful general, psychosocial and psychoeducational information – the aim should also be to elicit people’s key life themes and promote transformation in general as well as personal transformation at all levels. Some key aspects of online as opposed to in-person career counselling are discussed below.

#### ***Communication***

Gallo (2019), in Myers (2020), states, ‘Our role as counsellors is to meet our clients where they are, to communicate unconditional positive regard and to recognize how they view the world’ (n.p.). Similarly, it is important to ensure that clients are encouraged to express

themselves openly without fear of rejection because of their views. In other words, narratability and narrativity should be encouraged at all levels. First, every effort should be made to enable clients to narrate their stories without any impediment. Second, every effort should be made to elicit ‘high quality’ stories from them, that is, stories that reflect accurately who they are, that clarify their career-life identities, and that actively promote their self- and career construction (and facilitate life designing).

### *Special emphasis on promoting cross-cultural counselling*

The value of cross-cultural counselling is increased in in-person settings where non-verbal cues can be detected relatively easily and clarified. During online counselling, many culture-specific nuances can either not be observed or observed only partially. In-person communication allows counsellor and client to meet in person in a ‘safe’, supportive space (Maree, 2013; Savickas, 2019); observe each other’s body language (including facial expressions and hand and body movements); and connect this with the other person’s beliefs, cognitions, feelings, attitudes and moods to allow a ‘bigger picture’ to emerge. This is not always the case in online counselling (unless, of course, the online counselling is provided in synchronous face time). Both parties thus miss out on the opportunity to obtain valuable information in addition to the information provided by verbal communication only. This shortcoming is exacerbated if, for instance, the video is turned off during online counselling. Unreliable internet connections and poor signal strength often impede progress and frustrate both counsellor and client.

### *Promoting connectivity at all levels*

Online (remote) counselling is especially useful in remote areas and in cases where clients are physically challenged. In remote areas, the population density is often very low, and members of marginalised communities generally have to travel long distances on gravel or dirt roads. Online counselling (in groups especially) is more accessible and affordable and can be used to reach large numbers of (young) people in a relatively short space of time (Cherry, 2020), but this is currently only true in high-income countries. Because of environment-related obstacles, internet connectivity in rural areas can be a major problem. Information is retrieved at a much slower rate, and the cost of data retrieval is much higher in disadvantaged areas than in typical Global North contexts. All learners should have free and unimpeded internet connection to prevent the exclusion of the poor and marginalised, who should be able to connect to the widest array of service providers and to access opportunities on an equal footing to the more affluent.

### *Empowering people*

Online career counselling should be facilitated in a way that empowers people, promotes their adaptability and enhances their future work prospects. Especially in the South African situation, online career counselling should be aimed at promoting entrepreneurship among (young) people, introducing them to a broad array of entrepreneurial activities, advancing employability and converting hope into reality.

## *Some of the main similarities and differences between in-person and e-career counselling*

### *General observations*

In-person career counselling, like e-career counselling, should be aimed at ensuring that participants become acquainted with new and exciting career prospects and opportunities. Contextually relevant content should be provided through the latest digital learning methods that anyone with an internet connection can easily access at no additional cost. Furthermore, irrespective of the context in which career counselling is provided, the basic principles that govern career counselling remain largely the same in the case of e-career counselling. They include establishing mutual trust, creating a safe space, ensuring congruence, being inclusive, refraining from ‘advising’, validating responses, promoting the participation of all group members, ensuring that shy or ‘different’ young people benefit from participating, allowing sufficient time for the clarification of questions, completing questionnaires, keeping participants ‘interested’ and active, and, especially, finding a way to let each participant feel that she or he is being listened to, recognised, acknowledged and made to feel ‘special’. Career counsellors should therefore prepare thoroughly for all sessions. This includes ensuring that they are familiar with information communication technology, practising techniques beforehand (and ensuring that participants do likewise) and testing technology up front.

### *Different career counselling approaches*

While most career counsellors conduct in-person or group career counselling by first asking participants to complete assessments (‘tests’) before commencing with the actual counselling, there is a growing trend away from ‘over-testing’ people. Of late, many counsellors (working from a postmodern perspective) intervene without using any ‘tests’. (Debating this matter further, however, does not fall within the scope of this article.)

Over the past few years, I have researched the issue of assessing young people online and then proceeding to administer CCC offline, using the *Career Interest Profile* (Maree, 2017) and the *Maree Career Matrix* (Maree, 2016) (Maree, 2019, 2020). I have investigated the value of a blended approach (combining online and offline career counselling) as well as a hybrid approach (researching ‘best’ ways of integrating online and offline counselling) with considerable success. The way I approach blended counselling is to administer questionnaires and ‘tests’ online and then conduct small-group work while ensuring that ‘standard’ guidelines for preventing the spread of Covid-19 are adhered to.

### *The need for caution, prevention and referral*

Based on many years of research (Maree, 2013, 2019, 2020) in urban as well as remote areas, and using instruments that are available online and in hard copy format, the importance of doing everything possible to ensure that assessment and feedback take place in a manner that meets best practice from an ethical perspective cannot be overemphasised. Career counsellors at all levels also need to know when to refer clients to relevant experts if they encounter ‘changes’ (emotional or otherwise) that they are not qualified to deal with. Occasionally, even seemingly ‘innocuous’ questions, such as ‘What were the three most hurtful experiences in your youth that you do not want others to go through as well?’ (Maree, 2020), may cause anxiety in some people. Although such problems can be handled relatively easily by professionals in in-person settings, it is advisable to refrain from asking questions that may



trigger painful or disturbing memories during e-career counselling. Finally, there is always a risk of someone ‘hacking’ into this kind of communication. Every effort should therefore be made to protect clients’ privacy and security.

### ***Some of the main similarities and differences between individual and group e-career counselling***

#### *General observations*

The key difference between individual, small-group and large-group assessment lies more in the ‘how’ (process) of intervention than in the ‘what’ (content) of the assessment. Contextualising the process is crucial. When individual assessment is requested, in-person career counselling should be completed in 1 day, especially when clients have to travel long distances. In such cases, and even more so during the pandemic, it is advisable to administer e-counselling from start to finish. This has heightened the need for the development of new instruments that can be adapted, contextualised and administered online. It goes without saying that all assessments and interventions should adhere to standard ethical guidelines. It is also essential for career counsellors to master the basic information communication technology skills needed to facilitate online career counselling.

#### *Unique needs of entities requesting career counselling*

The unique needs of entities requesting career counselling will co-determine how the service is provided. Tertiary training institutions often request career counsellors to complete group online career counselling assessment and intervention within the space of two or three consecutive days or, in some instances, within a day and a half. In such instances, it is vital to contextualise existing career counselling programmes to meet the unique programme, schedule and needs of the entity requesting the intervention and the particular needs of the participants.

Assessing and counselling young people online in group contexts and providing feedback is a complex matter requiring further research and debate. It seems clear at this stage that groups of young people can be assessed successfully and counselled individually online. Precisely how online feedback should be provided in group format, however, requires further research.

#### ***The way forward***

Young people in particular have been negatively impacted by the pandemic; hence the emphasis in this article on fine-tuning career counselling efforts for the benefit of the youth. A key question requiring urgent answering is the following: How can we improve career counselling interventions in such a way that we can overcome Covid-19 pandemic-related challenges and identify and exploit opportunities in the best interests of everyone? This article argues that innovating and contextualising career counselling interventions can go a long way towards answering this question. Humankind has always exhibited the inventiveness and resourcefulness to manage major challenges, and this should also be the case with the Covid-19 pandemic. What should not be lost sight of, too, is the key principle of helping young people (1) actively master (deal with) what they have passively endured (suffered) (Savickas, 2020), (2) turn their pain into hope and a gift for others, (3) practise self-healing and (4) make social contributions (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2010; Hartung, 2018; Maree, 2013; Savickas, 2019).

It is hoped that the approach outlined here can help young people devise practicable strategies to actuate their sense of purpose and hope and experience an enhanced sense of self-worth and personal identity in their career-lives, as well as a sense of being part of something much bigger than themselves. Given the uncertainty of the future of work, there is a pressing need to help young people become employable and depend less on governments to provide employment. All possible attempts should be made to enhance their sense of entrepreneurship and self-entrepreneurship and increase their own and others' employability. Finally, for the kind of e-career counselling recommended here to succeed, the government and the private sector should jointly establish 'purpose-built online [e-career counselling] environments and understand the intersection between technology and [career counselling]' (Hogg, 2020, p. 5).

### ***Implications for policy, practice and future research***

E-career counselling in group contexts, especially, will grow in importance in the future if the ideal of providing career counselling for all those who are able and willing to work is to be realised. This calls for the development of assessment instruments and intervention strategies to facilitate e-career counselling in conjunction with the training and upskilling of career counsellors. Policy makers should note these developments and promote dialogue between stakeholders such as professional bodies, education departments and researchers on the future of e-counselling in general and e-career counselling in particular. Policies should clarify and promote the uniform use of e-career counselling in all contexts and ensure that 'best practice' is facilitated in diverse situations. Research is also needed on the differences between and relative value and effectiveness of in-person and online counselling.

### **Conclusion**

Autin et al. (2020) argue that

an emerging sense of hope centers on the belief that our society can reinvent itself to be more caring, just, and equitable . . . we hope career development specialists engage this time of crisis as an opportunity to help shape a world where decent, supportive, and dignified work is possible for all who want it. (p. 492)

This article shares this sentiment and proposes some suggestions on how innovative and contextualised career counselling based on counselling for self- and career construction and life design principles can meet young people's need for e-career counselling during and probably after the Covid-19 pandemic. The article indicates also how e-career counselling can be used to promote social justice and assist young people who are able and willing to work to further their career-life stories, enhance their adaptability and employability, and improve their chances of flourishing in the midst of major challenges.

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