In search of career-life meaning: Enhancing the existential experience of a gifted learner

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Abstract

This article reports on how intervention research based on integrative career counselling enhanced the existential experience of a gifted learner. The participant of this study was a purposively selected gifted 17-year-old girl learner in search of a career that would help her experience meaning, purpose, and hope in and through her career-life. An explanatory (QUALITATIVE-quantitative) research design was used together with qualitative career construction counselling-based methods. A new standardised test was used to generate quantitative data. Savickas' guidelines for analysing career construction-elicited data were implemented to identify themes and subthemes in the outcomes. The intervention helped the participant decide on a career through which she could experience meaning, purpose, and hope in her career-life. Longitudinal research is needed to determine the medium- and long-term influence of the type of intervention discussed here with gifted learners in individual as well as group contexts across the diversity spectrum.

Keywords: Existential experience, gifted learners, career construction counselling, qualitative-quantitative approach, intervention research

Introduction

Robertson (2013) and Grinshtain and Miedijensky (2024) highlight the need for research on the effect of specific career counselling interventions on different people, and how such interventions can help establish a roadmap for improved interventions and also help initiate policy changes to create positive environments for gifted learners. Similar calls for research on gifted learners are made by other authors such as Callaghan et al. (2017) and Maree (2022). It is common for gifted learners in particular to seek guidance on how to experience meaning, hope, and purpose in their lives – yet this remains a largely under-researched topic. These learners often try to help others understand and deal with painful experiences similar to those they themselves faced. Today's world is faced with, among other things, the devastating impact of escalating wars, invasions, and global warming, making it even more challenging for gifted learners to find a way to achieve the difference they believe they can and should make in the world around them. Early in their lives, they become aware of and attempt to come to terms with their 'otherness'. Their academic curiosity and insight often leads to a sense of isolation from their peers, triggering concern about who they are and what the purpose of their life might be. Their faster intellectual growth is closely bound to their existential experiences. Their existential experience is entwined with their endeavours to clarify their evolving self- and career identity (Trần & Hoàng, 2024). Achieving fulfilment in their professional careers, making social contributions through their work-life, and witnessing the positive impact of their endeavours on others promotes their overall experiential and existential wellbeing. Beyond the

routine acquisition of knowledge, gifted learners grapple with questions of purpose, self- and career identity, self-efficacy, and self-actualisation.

In my experience, most gifted learners grapple with understanding **why** they are gifted, and are frustrated in teaching and learning environments that rarely challenge them. As a result, they often struggle to find purpose and meaning in their life journey and are faced with complex questions such as "Who am I really?", "What is the purpose of my life?", "What can I do to have a positive impact on the world?", and "Where do I belong?" They often have to contend internally and externally with significant others' expectations that make little sense to them. Parental and societal expectations of them are often experienced as 'unfair' and unwanted. Their values and wishes often would alienate them from their less gifted peers as they try to reconcile their giftedness with their idiosyncratic personal ambitions to impact the world positively.

In this article the term existential experience is defined as reflections about life and death and the importance of retaining a sense of hope and meaning in life. For the purposes of this article, it refers predominantly to the 'profound' life experiences of gifted young people relating to meaning, hope, and purpose, for instance promoting social justice (Silverman, 2021) Bauman and Waldon (1998) (in Wilmshurst (2020, p. 136) argue that existential counselling endeavours "to support the person in confronting the anxiety-provoking truths of existence while finding meaning and living authentically".

However, gifted leaners' unique needs and trauma generally go unnoticed and unattended to, often leading to these learners seriously questioning the meaning and purpose of their lives.

Overview of what we know currently about gifted learners

Summary of current knowledge about gifted learners

i. Potential or promise is initially the key criterion for giftedness. Later, actual achievement and, ultimately, eminence are the key criteria (Subotnik et al., 2011).
ii. There is no universally applicable definition that transcends cultures and contexts (T. Clark, personal communication, December 22, 2023; L. Sheffield, personal communication, December 24, 2023). I tend to agree with Smedsrud's (2020, p. 94) view that "giftedness cannot be adequately defined through single or multiple definitions".
iii. While certain generic traits can be identified in gifted learners, each gifted learner has unique characteristics. Current definitions generally fail to differentiate between gifted learners in terms of appearance, behaviour, and potential (Peterson, 2009).
iv. Any attempt at defining giftedness should include all those thought to qualify as gifted. Current definitions of giftedness often exclude learners who "do not fall into nice, neat stereotype[s] … ethnic minorities, underachievers; children who live in poverty, and … show potential in non-traditional ways" (Renzulli, 2005, p. 80).
v. Gifted learners seek a sense of autonomy and reject constriction in 'meaningless' structures.
vi. Typically, gifted learners do well when they contribute socially (Sternberg, 2003) – they are seldom satisfied with merely 'blossoming' on their own (Pinxten et al., 2023).
vii. Gifted learners are an overlooked and excluded group, with their special educational needs almost completely ignored in developing countries such as South Africa (Maree, 2018).

The intervention research discussed in this article addressed these issues by proposing tailored intervention strategies and techniques that go beyond the standard curriculum.

Chen and Wong (2013) advocate the customisation of career theories to align them with the unique needs of gifted people to provide a better framework for understanding the distinctive needs of this population group. The following section should be seen through the specialised lens of career construction counselling.

Theoretical framework

Career construction theory

Savickas' (2013, 2019a; 2019b) career construction theory (CCT) guides not only the construction of people's numerous career-life stories but also the analysis and interpretation of these stories. Seen from this perspective, career counsellors no longer merely elicit stories 'of' or about their clients, but rather stories 'for' their clients. The aim of this approach is to co-author stories with clients to enable them to deal successfully with contemporary challenges and to enhance their existential experience.

According to CCT, people shape their careers by extracting meaning from their occupational actions and experiences and by entering society and contributing socially. This theoretical framework integrates memories, present experiences, and future intentions into evolving life themes (Savickas, 2015a, 2015b). CCT advocates obtaining people's 'scores' in 'tests' but at the same time stresses the importance of focusing on subjective features ('stories') during the career counselling process. It aims to foster critical self-reflection through biographical reflexivity or metacommunication that emerges through conversation and work behaviour (Savickas, 2021). Uncovering central life themes is integral to this process (Hartung, 2007; Maree, 2020) in which the career construction counsellor's role is to promote narratability, promote autobiographicity, and promote adaptability in people.

Key facets of career construction counselling

Career construction counselling, as advocated by Savickas (2019a; 2021), promotes people's narratability, autobiographicity, career adaptability, intentionality, and activity with the aim of enhancing their career-lives.

Narratability: Recounting coherent career-life stories. Narratability is people's ability to articulate their career-life stories (micro-life stories) coherently. These career-life stories are described by Savickas et al. (2009) as unique texts crafted by the people concerned, which are later read back to them by career counsellors to validate their authenticity.

Autobiographicity: Leveraging life stories during transitions. Autobiographicity is people's capacity to turn to their autobiographies (life stories) when confronted with transitions in their career-lives. People leverage their autobiographies (through autobiographicity) as a resource, providing proven strategies and implicit advice on managing similar transitions in the future when life imposes changes in their workplace.

Career adaptability: Navigating personalised career trajectories. Adaptability addresses the need for change, while narratability addresses the need for continuity. Together, adaptability and narratability can help people cultivate flexible, reliable (trustworthy) selves. This, in turn,

empowers them to participate actively in meaningful actions and succeed in knowledge societies (Savickas et al., 2009). Career counsellors are today tasked with helping clients select and construct careers that can lead to meaningful and purposeful lives. This requires training that not only enhances employability but also transcends the traditional pursuit of life-long employment in one company. Career counsellors foster adaptability in their clients because of adaptability's crucial role in increasing people's employability.

Savickas (2019a) and Porfeli et al. (2013) established a connection between people's self-evaluative capabilities and an ABC model of attitudes (A), beliefs (B), and competencies (C), correlating positively with four key 'adapt-abilities', namely concern, control, curiosity, and confidence These 'adapt-abilities' are key in helping people navigate rapidly changing contexts, especially when encountering transitions or career-related traumas (Savickas & Porfeli, 2010).

Intentionality in career development. Intentionality signifies the determination to 'make meaning' of one's life (Maree & Morgan, 2012). Watkins (1984) maintains that intentionality is reflected in people's ability to generate new or alternative plans, gather information on different career-life options, assess various options, explore these options, and eventually make sound career-life decisions.

Activity: Catalysing change in career development. In career counselling, activity is a crucial catalyst for actual change as it is through active engagement that the transformative 'magic' unfolds when people initiate forward movement. The processes of self-construction, career construction, life designing, and making social contributions manifest only when people actively pursue goals, transforming passivity into intention and intention into action (Savickas, 2019a).

Rationale for the study

I agree with Gould (2010) when he says, "I am somehow less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein's brain than in the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops" Although much attention has been given to the interplay between quantitative, or 'objective,' methods, primarily reliant on test scores, and qualitative, or 'subjective,' approaches, mainly centred on capturing people's narratives, little attention has been paid to integrative methodology as a means of identifying giftedness and helping gifted people experience existentially satisfactory and relevant direction in their lives (Maree, 2017a, 2017b). The research discussed in this article stemmed from the belief that a case study approach based on the 'new' integrative methodology could best illuminate the career-life journey of a gifted young woman seeking to find a way to leave a 'permanent' legacy (a key existential need for her).

Goals of the study

The study set out to determine whether and how integrative career counselling for career construction enhanced the existential experience of a gifted learner. The research aimed to answer the following (explorative) research questions:

a. How did the intervention enhance the participant's sense of self- and career identity?
b. How did the intervention enhance the existential experience of the participant?

(In phrasing the research questions, I followed Savickas (M. L. Savickas, personal communication, February, 2024) who stressed the importance of asking 'how' questions rather than merely seeking to ascertain the impact of an intervention on participants.

Method

Participant

Melanie (pseudonym) was conveniently selected as a white bilingual (Afrikaans- and English-speaking) 17-year-old young woman in Grade 12 from an upper-class socio-economic background. In early 2024 Melanie sought career counselling as she was uncertain about her preferred fields of study, adding, "*You can help me by showing how I can use my qualities and skills to make a lasting difference in communities and the lives of others*". Melanie and her parents agreed to participate in an integrative career counselling intervention, which involved conducting qualitative as well as quantitative assessments and then integrating the outcomes to facilitate self- and career construction counselling. It was emphasised that while career choice, psychosocial, and psychoeducational information would be provided, Melanie was ultimately responsible for advising herself on what to do.

Mode of inquiry

I adopted an integrative QUALITATIVE-quantitative approach (uppercase signifying the greater weighting given to the qualitative aspect) to the career counselling intervention based on an explorative, intrinsic, descriptive, single case study design. A naturalistic perspective rooted in an interpretive paradigm was my interpretive lens.

Procedure

The intervention was completed in a single day. In session 1 (345 minutes; elicitation of career-life story), Melanie responded to questions in a number of questionnaires (see below). During the first 30 minutes, I also spoke to the parents to obtain details on Melanie's early development. Melanie's qualitative and quantitative outcomes were then integrated, after which session 2 (70 minutes; authorisation of Melanie's career-life story). During this session, Melanie and I reflected on and discussed her answers to questions put to her during session 1 in order to authenticate the micro-stories (she was repeatedly asked to explain what her answers meant **to her**). In session 3 (60 minutes; change and forward movement facilitation), Melanie, her parents, and I took part in a feedback interview. Together, we agreed on practical steps Melanie could take to finalise her career choice decision. We also reflected on the general, psychoeducational, psychosocial, and career choice information I had asked her to consider. The interview included a discussion of Melanie's key life themes (uncovered by her responses to questions about her most significant challenges early in her life) (Freud, 1964; Savickas, 2019a). I stressed that Melanie could connect her career choices to her mission (the personal meaning she wanted to experience in her career) and her vision (the social contribution she wanted to make in and through her career). Whenever she requested 'advice', her exact words (answers to questions) were read out loud and she was asked to reflect on the implicit advice to herself embedded in the responses. I repeatedly reminded her that her stated areas for development and growth could be transformed into strengths and that any 'pain' or 'suffering' (Freud, 1964) she had experienced could be converted into meaning, hope, purpose, and social contributions.

Data-generating instruments

Quantitative. The Maree Career Matrix (MCM) (Maree, 2016, 2017, Maree and Taylor, 2016a, 2016b; Savickas, 2015) is grounded in Holland's interest theory and model and incorporates aspects of the trait-and-factor theory, developmental theory, and social learning theory. Developed and standardised in South Africa between 2002 and 2015, this instrument assesses interests as well as self-assessed confidence levels regarding various careers. Featuring 152 occupations grouped into 19 categories, each comprising eight careers, the MCM demonstrates strong psychometric properties. Rasch analysis confirms that the MCM's interest scales measure a unified construct, with all categories exhibiting reliability coefficients surpassing .70. Furthermore, test-retest reliability for career interests and confidence estimates exceeds .70 across all categories. MCM scores offer career counsellors and their clients a solid foundation for exploring and gaining deeper insights into career profiles during counselling sessions.

Qualitative. The Career Interest Profile (CIP, Version 6) (Maree, 2017b) is used to generate qualitative (narrative) data ('stories'). The CIP is rooted primarily in Savickas' career construction theory (Savickas, 2019a), as well as the work of Adler (1958) and Cochran (1997). As a qualitative instrument comprising four parts, the CIP's trustworthiness in different contexts has been shown conclusively, making it a highly effective career counselling instrument (Maree, 2017b). CIP questions are carefully structured, starting with uncomplicated questions and ending with 'deep' penetrating questions.

Rigour of the study

Melanie was repeatedly prompted to reflect on her experiences and to express her agreement or disagreement with the intervention findings and interpretations. Her feedback was carefully recorded and considered. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies enabled triangulation, ensuring comprehensive data generation. Data were also generated to support potential replication of the case study in different settings. Crystallisation was promoted by asking a range of qualitative questions (Janesick, 2000). An external coder with a doctoral degree in educational psychology independently coded the data to ensure consistency with the identified themes. Throughout the intervention I maintained open communication with Melanie, discussing all aspects of the intervention and explaining the assessment instruments used (Kewley, 2006). I repeatedly asked her to clarify her responses during the data analysis (Sieck, 2012) to ensure accuracy and integrity in interpreting the findings.

Data analysis

Specific actions listed below were taken to strengthen the qualitative data analysis.

As recommended by Savickas (2019a), Melanie was repeatedly encouraged to elaborate on the 'deeper' meaning of her responses to the qualitative questions (e.g. her responses to the question on her role models). Repetitive words, expressions, or phrases were carefully documented, and Melanie's own words were read back to her to promote introspection. I also asked Melanie to verbalise her thoughts to make the experience more authentic for her. Melanie and I used her responses to the questions about the most significant challenges in her early life to elicit her key life themes (Freud, 1964; Savickas, 2019a.) These themes were then correlated by her and me (co-construction) with various fields of study.

Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings

The findings from the quantitative inventory shed light on Melanie's (quantitative) career interests and confidence (as yielded by the MCM). These findings were then triangulated with her qualitatively identified career category preferences (as yielded by the CIP) to enhance the research outcomes and evaluate their complementarity (Tonkin-Crine et al., 2015). Identified career categories were discussed with Melanie to ensure their alignment with her own (qualitative) perceptions of her interest profile. Finally, they were cross-referenced with the other insights obtained from the Career Interest Profile (CIP). The integrated data were used to identify fields of study that could support her in securing employment, enhancing her employability, and nurturing a sense of meaning, hope, and purpose in her life – and help her arrive at advice from herself regarding how to use her career to enhance her existential experience in and through her career-life.

Ethical issues

Melanie and her parents provided written informed assent and consent, respectively, for the analysis and anonymous reporting of the research. Approval for the research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the relevant University. Care was taken to adhere to ethical standards and manage the dual roles of researcher and practitioner (Hay-Smith et al., 2016).

Findings

Quantitative outcomes

According to the MCM, Melanie's highest preferred interest and confidence categories were Entrepreneurship; Social, care-giving, and community services; Medical and/or paramedical services; Legal practice and security services; Persuasive (Marketing); Sport; Arts and Culture; and Executive and management practice.

Qualitative outcomes

Melanie's preferred interest categories were Social, care-giving, and community services; Medical and/or paramedical services; Entrepreneurship (running and maintaining a personal business); Legal practice and security services; Executive and management practice; Persuasive (Marketing); and Word art.

Melanie's responses to questions in the final section of the CIP are provided below (her verbatim responses have been minimally edited to maintain authenticity). Due to space limitations, only specific responses are addressed.

In reply to the question "How can I be of value, of use or of help to you?" (Maree, 2017b; Savickas, 2019a), Melanie replied: "*You can help me by providing more clarity on what I could study and where my qualities and skills would be useful in making a difference in the community.*" (Here, she indicates here a sense of social responsibility and her desire to identify a career that will help answer her existential questions and enhance her existential experience.) Asked about her greatest strengths, she said: "*I am hardworking and driven. I am a good leader. I am intelligent. I make thoughtful decisions. I am a people person, building deep personal relationships to assist and be there for others. I am determined and strong, not allowing*

setbacks to defeat me easily. I am brave to step out of my comfort zone to address certain issues and try new things."

Asked about her areas for growth, Melanie said: "*I tend to overcommit and, therefore, take on too much. I sometimes neglect my family and close friends because I become too busy with my responsibilities. I struggle to communicate with people who intimidate me at school. I enjoy dreaming big, which usually leads to disappointment. I also want to develop more self-confidence."* (An indication of a somewhat low sense of self.) How others (teachers and friends) saw her can be seen in the following words: "Melanie has a passion for community service and also serves as the head of the school's Outreach Committee. In the past quarter, she managed a project that raised funds for the school's ground staff, and it was a huge success." Asked what she valued most, Melanie said: "*Helping others, making social contributions, leading.*" (Both responses indicate her need to identify a career that will enable her to actualise her desire to experience existential fulfilment in and through her work.)

People she admired:

a. "My dad [a medical doctor] because he is the hardest working person I know and an incredible leader. The way he speaks with his colleagues and patients is all from a place of care." (This is an instance of a 'guiding line' rather than a person not related to Melanie.)
b. "Priscilla Shirer because she is an incredibly strong Christian motivational speaker and actress who serves as a good example for young girls."

Her favourite quotations (Melanie's advice to herself):

a. "Whatever you're going through, no matter how painful it is, God will use it so He can bring you closer to Him."
b. "The greatest glory in living is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."
c. "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

(These responses, too, indicate her need to identify a career that will help her experience existential fulfilment in and through her work.)

Melanie faced three major challenges during her childhood. First, she felt anxious and stressed when competing at a high level, both against others and herself, but she learned coping mechanisms to manage her anxiety. Second, she had difficulty forming and maintaining long-term friendships (another trait of gifted learners). Third, even when achieving exceptionally, Melanie was driven by a self-imposed compulsion to constantly enhance her performance, a trait commonly observed in gifted people (Maree, 2022). Lastly, in response to my question about what else I needed to know about her, she said: *"My biggest dream is to travel the world one day. I want to start and execute upliftment projects after school and make a difference in the lives of others. My greatest fear is to live in uncertainty."*

Asked what (if anything) had changed as a result of the assessment, she said: *"I have gained greater clarity about my future studies and also about myself. I am seriously excited to go to university because it no longer feels like I am stepping into uncertainty. Moreover, I have learned that I need to keep working, learning, and trying regardless of others' opinions."* (Reflexivity.)

When asked if she had any further comments, Melanie smiled and said: *"I learned a great deal about myself from myself today. Now, I feel more confident in my ability to identify and*

overcome aspects of my life that I sometimes struggle with. I am excited about my potential to ensure that everything I do in life is truly meaningful and assists others in their quest to find answers to life's profoundest questions.

Melanie was prompted repeatedly to contemplate the overlap between the quantitative and qualitative outcomes to promote triangulation. Together, we searched for repeated words and phrases, as well as themes and subthemes, in the CIP reflections and between the CIP and MCM responses. The quantitative results validated the qualitative preferred fields of study and vice versa.

Melanie and I jointly compiled a table juxtaposing the many 'micro-stories' (qualitative outcomes) and the 'scores' (quantitative outcomes). She carefully reflected on the equivalence between the 'scores' and the 'stories' in order to triangulate the two data sets and established a strong positive correlation between the two sets. Together, we agreed that she would do thorough job analysis on the following study fields:

- Radiography/Sonography/Diagnostic Ultrasound
- Medicine
- Speech-Language Pathology
- Educational Psychology
- Financial Accountancy
- Forensic Accountancy

I encouraged Melanie to go home and do a thorough job analysis, to carefully consider her options for finding a suitable outlet for her talents, and to reach out to me if she wanted to.

Three weeks later she provided the following feedback: "*Our meeting gave me peace in narrowing down the possibilities of what careers to pursue. After some research and conversations with people and students in particular jobs, I have decided that I would like to study in South Africa and want to choose a degree in a (para-)medical field where I can pursue my passion of doing what I love and have the guaranteed certainty to have multiple job-offers. I intend to apply for a Bachelor in Sonography. I would like to keep on studying and specialize after that. My second choice would be to study a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology. Should I like to study abroad in future, in the particular country of my interest, there is no direct entry from high school into the Doctor of Medicine (four years) program. All applicants must have obtained a degree prior to admission*."

Discussion

Superficially, the study examined the effect of a brief career construction intervention on a gifted young female learner seeking career counselling. However, on a more conceptual plane, it advocated a contextually sensitive approach to helping a gifted young woman enact her need for a meaningful existential experience through her desire to devote her life to helping others actively master what she had passively suffered. The approach involved the reconstruction of a Western paradigm to meet the needs in a developing country context (Laher & Kramer, 2023).

The two research questions are discussed in the following sections.

How did the intervention enhance the participant's sense of self- and career identity?

The participant (Melanie) presented with career choice uncertainty (Rottinghaus & Miller, 2013) about which field of study and career to choose. My decision to use a career construction intervention in her case was influenced by a range of research findings (see, for instance, Cochran (1997); Maree (2020); Nystul (2016); Savickas (2019a), b; and Sharf (2013). According to Hartung et al. (2022), people's sense of assuredness and well-being is enhanced by career choice "processes of occupational engagement, career adaptability, and career decidedness" (p. 2). The approach discussed here enabled the participant (Melanie) to narrate her career-life story (narratability) and draw on that story to enact her dream of making a social contribution and in the process helped her experience enhanced existential meaning in her chosen career (autobiographicity) (Savickas, 2019a). Together, Melanie and I drew on key facets of her career-life story to help her deal with the transition she was facing and devise a strategy to clarify her objective career identity and her subjective career-life identity (Savickas & Savickas, 2019). She could then discover and bring into play her key life themes in combination with her vocational traits and adaptability (developmental resources). Her doubts about her future gave way to a sense of direction and goal setting as well as a sense of intentionality and actual action and forward movement (actionality). These findings support those of Del Corso et al. (2011), Maree (2019), and Nota et al. (2016) on the value of career construction counselling in diverse contexts. Importantly, the intervention facilitated integration of Melanie's conscious knowledge about herself with her subconscious insights about herself.

How did the intervention enhance the existential experience of the participant?

The 'storyline' that pervades and 'glues together' Melanie's self- and career identity reveals who she is, where she is headed, why she exists, and why executing her central life theme (her desire to help others and leave a lasting legacy) is so important to her (Savickas, 2019a). This finding supports Fouad et al. (2009) and Gati et al. (2013, 2021) who assert that the provision of information alone does not meet people's deepest career counselling needs.

Melanie's feedback shows that the intervention promoted the achievement of the "'developmental layers of the psychological self, namely the person as an actor, the person as agent, and the person as the author" (McAdams, 2013, p. 273). See the discussion below.

The psychological self as a social actor

Melanie's request *"assist me in clarifying what my qualities and skills are"* was dealt with during the assessment. From a vocational guidance (social actor) perspective, she understood that different fields of study could help her realise her desire to help people in need and enhance her existential experience. Her heightened self-insight regarding her main interest categories and associated study fields was revealed in her answers to questions during the feedback interview (Gülsen et al., 2021).

The psychological self as a motivated agent. After the intervention, Melanie exhibited greater awareness of the attitudes, beliefs, and competencies needed to achieve her ambitions. She showed greater confidence in her ability to identify areas for development in her life and an increased readiness to draw on her adaptability and ability to negotiate career-life transitions. Her psychological self as a motivated agent was thus strengthened from a career guidance point of view. The intervention clarified her career-life goals and helped her understand better why

she experienced some self-doubt about her ability to actualise the lofty goals she had set for herself. These changes promoted her sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) and helped her decide on a number of careers for job analysis (thus advancing her psychological self as a motivated agent) (Gülsen et al., 2021).

The psychological self as an autobiographical author. Above all, Melanie's feedback indicated that the intervention had promoted her psychological self as an autobiographical author. Her enhanced self-insight about the reasons for doubting herself and wanting to improve (typical of gifted people) and for trying to 'please everyone' and in the process over-committing herself (also typical of gifted people) helped her realise that it was essential to consider her own needs in addition to those of others. More than anything, though, she was happy to discover that living out her central life themes (see above) was not dependent on her becoming a medical specialist (like her father and also her role model). She realised that her dream of making a social contribution, helping people in need, and leaving a lasting legacy (like Nelson Mandela, another of her role models) was the 'ultimate' existential experience – and nothing stood in her way to achieve this dream. Connecting the dots of her career-life story (integrating her conscious knowledge about herself and her subconscious insights about herself) had been facilitated by her recounting and drawing on her career-life story (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021). Autobiographicity had thus occurred, confirming that her psychological self as an autobiographical author had been enhanced. From a career construction counselling perspective, her past, present, and envisaged future had been merged into a meaning-, hope-, and purpose-filled future career-life story (Hartung et al., 2022; Rottinghaus et al., 2017; Tirri, 2023).

In summary: These research findings confirm McAdams' (2010) statement that "[n]umerous studies have shown that deriving positive [existential] meanings from negative events are associated with life satisfaction and indicators of emotional wellbeing" (p. 191). The findings of this research also support Chen and Wong's (2013) view that integrating career development and counselling theories can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the career exploration needs of gifted students. In addition, the study revealed that career and personal counselling are intertwined and stressed the importance of linking gifted learners' motivations for seeking career guidance with their broader quest for meaning and purpose (Rodríguez-Fernández & Sternberg, 2023). Integrating career counselling paradigms and incorporating narratives and assessments offers career counselling practitioners a robust framework for interventions with gifted learners grappling with issues of meaning and purpose in life (Savickas, 2016). The findings presented here are in line with earlier research by Hartung (2015) and Masdonati et al. (2009), which highlighted the effectiveness of personal career counselling in resolving career decision-making challenges. The findings also support Greene's (2003) view that career counselling for the gifted should be action oriented and considered in conjunction with other aspects of life.

Limitations

First, my bias towards people from minority groups in general and gifted people in particular, and my deep involvement in the research topic (enhancing the existential experience of gifted learners) may have influenced me during the intervention. Second, other researchers may interpret the data differently arrive at draw different conclusions. Third, the participant's unique perceptions, beliefs, and insights may differ from those of other gifted young women in South Africa (a country with many different cultures and subcultures). Lastly, I had to rely

largely on European and North American sources, which are not typical contexts in which new developments in career counselling occur and are applied.

Recommendations for theory, practice, future research, and policy

Despite the predominance of trait-and-factor approaches in Africa, avant garde approaches such as career construction counselling should be considered to better cater for the needs of gifted learners.

In terms of **research**, studies should be undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of new approaches in meeting the needs of gifted learners in developing countries. These studies should consider the adaptations needed to ensure alignment with the contemporary challenges facing gifted learners.

From a **practical** standpoint, intensive training should be provided to career counsellors on the use of innovative approaches in career counselling.

From a **policy** perspective, national departments of basic education in Africa especially should re-examine the justification for excluding gifted students from their roster of special education needs. All gifted learners should be accorded equitable access to educational support.

Conclusion

Many authors (e.g. Callaghan et al., 2017) argue that identifying and addressing the unique needs of gifted learners receives insufficient attention and that most gifted children will in all likelihood never be made aware of and realise their giftedness. Humble (2016), for example, maintains that "in the slums of Dar es Salaam children of high ability wait to be discovered, their contribution to economic growth and development wasted because no-one believes they are there. Children who don't know what they can achieve" (p. 2). The question may well be asked: How many gifted learners has the world lost and is still losing daily? A potential future Mother Teresa, an Albert Einstein, a Patrick Gauss, a Pythagoras, and other luminaries who might have made important contributions to humankind? (Bar-On, 2007). Through integrative career counselling for gifted learners, counsellors can elicit these learners' career-life micro-narratives and uncover ways to use and develop their unique skills, enact their core life themes, and assist them in making appropriate career choices. This in turn will help them experience a sense of 'symbolic immortality' (Lifton, 1979) during the continuous processes of self-discovery and the shaping of career identity.

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