

Narrative potential and career counseling under quantity, quality, and mixed interventions: An emphasis on university students

Australian Journal of Career Development
2023, Vol. 32(1) 48–59

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DOI: 10.1177/10384162231153530

journals.sagepub.com/home/acd



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Abstract

Although robust evidence has been accumulating over the last decades supporting the effectiveness of career counseling in various populations, yet there are scarce conceptual or empirical studies investigating the impact of distinct approaches, such as traditional-“psychometric,” narrative, or a mixed (integrative) one. The primary aim of this paper is to make a contribution in the field, providing a synthetic overview of contemporary research findings regarding the effectiveness of narrative and mixed career counseling approaches with a special focus on university students. The recent trend of utilizing mixed approaches in career assessment and intervention is also emphasized in the article, suggesting they may have a great potential in helping young adults advance meaning-making about career and life design. Finally, a discussion of both benefits and challenges relating to narrative and mixed interventions along with recommendations for extending research in the area of assessing career interventions’ effectiveness for university students is provided.

Keywords

Career counseling, intervention, effectiveness, university students, narrative approaches, mixed (integrative) approaches

Narrative Potential and Career Counseling under Quantity, Quality, and Mixed Interventions: an emphasis on university students

Although robust evidence has been accumulating over the last decades supporting the effectiveness of career counseling in various populations, yet there are scarce conceptual or empirical studies investigating the impact of distinct approaches, such as traditional-“psychometric”, narrative, or a mixed (integrative) one. The primary aim of this paper is to make a contribution in the field, providing a synthetic overview of contemporary research findings regarding effectiveness of narrative and mixed career counseling approaches with a special focus on university students. The recent trend of utilizing mixed approaches in career assessment and intervention is also emphasized in the article, suggesting they may have a great potential in helping young adults advance meaning-making about career and life design. Finally, a discussion of both benefits and challenges relating to narrative and mixed interventions along with recommendations for extending research in the area of assessing career interventions’ effectiveness for university students is provided.

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Introduction

Rapid and largely unforeseen contemporary changes in work, economy and society should be taken into consideration by career counselors who need to apply the most effective interventions with their clients. The traditional-“psychometric” career counseling approaches have been employed in counseling practice for more than a century (McIlveen et al., 2003), adhering to the “person-environment” model, which is characterized by an ideal fit between job seekers and existing jobs (Hartung & Santilli, 2018). This model served the purpose of preparing employees for stable workplaces. The early traditional theories (e.g. Parsons’ trait-and-factor approach, Holland’s typology) of the past are still dominant in the career guidance and counseling field

(McMahon, 2018). However, career development no longer occurs in a stable and linear world of work; rather, the notion of career may be defined by the metaphor of an “unpredictable journey”, including several highways and byways (Kaliris & Issari, 2022). Today career may be viewed by individuals in a subjective manner as a lifelong series of consecutive work and life experiences, and not constrained only within the career choice dimension.

Accordingly, career interventions should be adjusted to address new needs and goals. Although traditional-“psychometric” approaches are still useful some parameters may be neglected or masked in analyzing static traits and matching them with specific work environments. For instance, a pervasive trend in critiques of career psychology relates to a perception that its main focus is the western white middle class and that career counseling practice that is merely based on tests may not be appropriate for minorities, women and other special populations. Moreover, the mainstream theories and techniques may not apply across countries and cultures (McMahon, 2018). Savickas (2015) states that although earlier psychometric interventions are still relevant and effective, especially when the goal is set to help a person choose among various options of studies and occupations, they do not seem appropriate in empowering individuals through transition phases (Savickas, 2015). Additionally, traditional-“psychometric” approaches are not that sensitive in assessing subjective or phenomenological dimensions in individuals, including lived experiences which affect career development (Maree, 2015).

Through the last two decades a shift has occurred from traditional, relatively static career interventions, to more dynamic, narrative career counseling approaches (McMahon, 2018) that seem more aligned with the new purposes for the career counseling field. The narrative approaches in career counseling followed the narrative turn in the wider field of counseling psychology (McLeod, 2003) which reflects the shift from collecting information about clients to assisting them in generating experiences through their stories. In narrative approaches self is regarded as an a posteriori structure which has been constructed (and construed) through an individual’s narratives (self-construction). The narrative epistemology in career counseling; an example is the Life Design Counseling; strongly supports the fact that reality is constructed in social and cultural contexts, and multiple truths are dependent on diverse, albeit interrelated, micro- and macro-contextual systems. According to this epistemology, people change as they engage in activities that confer meaning to their situation and behaviors (Savickas, 2015).

Narrative career counseling approaches could be understood as a support process for the individual while they are trying to present their life story as a whole. Personal stories that people share with the career counselor are vital as they help them envision the future, integrating experiences of the past and the present in order to formulate future prospects (McMahon & Watson, 2012). At the centre of all different narrative career development theories is the attempt to describe the dynamic complexity of individuals' life and career paths (Rossier et al., 2021).

Narrative approaches enable a customized approach taking the biological and social ecosystem of each unique individual into account. Reflexivity is viewed as a critical way of appraising the individual's personal and social experience (Duarte et al., 2019). From a different perspective, the so called "traditional-psychometric" career interventions use a test-and-tell positivist approach, having standardized methods of appraisal which guide the entire intervention (Maree, 2018). Their final aim is to facilitate decision-making, through the combination of test results and training-occupational information. Traditional career counseling usually positions the practitioner as the expert and the client as dependent upon the practitioner's expertise (Niles & Gutierrez, 2019); whereas narrative interventions differ as they regard the client as epicenter of the intervention.

Except for the quantitative and the qualitative sides of career assessment and career counseling, emergent has been to integrate both approaches finding ways to capitalize on the synthesis of scores with stories, for the greater benefit of clients. This kind of effort leads to mixed models of career counseling and assessment (qualitative and quantitative). The term that has been mostly used in the literature is "integrative approaches". An example of that method is the Integrative Structured Interview, that may guide a narrative-based interview with clients based on their scores on Self-Directed Search (McMahon et al., 2020). Combining storytelling and quantitative test results facilitates a rich integrative process that may enable participants to "contextualise, make sense of, and learn from their scores, career decisions and transitions" (McMahon et al., 2020, p. 540). Thus, the client is considered an active participant in the process of meaning making (Ambiel, 2020).

Given the variety of different approaches regarding how career guidance and counseling can be conducted, a question emerges if career interventions have in fact benefits for clients' career development (Hirschi & Froidevaux, 2020). However, in order to be able to understand if, how, and the extent to which various career counseling approaches are effective for the specific population they are intended for, first, we should define the term "career intervention". According

to the widespread definition that has been provided by Spokane and Oliver (1983) this term refers to any treatment or effort intended to enhance an individual's career development or to enable the person to make better career-related decisions.

The central aim of this conceptual paper is to provide a synthetic overview of contemporary research findings regarding the effectiveness of narrative and mixed (integrative) approaches of career interventions in adults. Particular emphasis is placed on university students, since little attention has been paid to the impact of such interventions specifically for this group.

We opted to consider the level of university students as the focus of this conceptual review compared to other moments in life since this transition denotes many developmental issues with some of them considering career development and work. In this phase of "emerging adulthood" that refers to the time span between the years of late adolescence and the twenties, a variety of different alternative paths remain possible and few things have been decided with certainty for the future (Vilhjálmisdóttir, 2015; Whiston & Rose, 2015). Moreover, in youth of this phase identity formation regarding career is in progress, therefore, there is a high need of providing effective and targeted career counseling interventions to that group (Whiston & Rose, 2015).

More specifically, from our perspective, the university students' population should be prioritized in career counseling as they have various needs, ranging from choosing a major area of studies to generating meanings regarding their educational or vocational transitions. It seems essential to focus on career development and also effectiveness of career interventions in university students because at this point they are trying to explore future career perspectives. Most importantly, young individuals tend to envision their personal and occupational future with fear and uncertainty mainly due to the precarious conditions that are often met in the labor market and the high rates of unemployment in this age group (Sovet et al., 2018). However, many graduates seem to be inadequately prepared for the transition from tertiary education to the labor market, experiencing stress and a lack of readiness to make career decisions (Whiston & Rose, 2015).

Therefore, they should be provided with multidimensional, holistic and effective career services that will help them develop self-awareness, get access to the labor market and in the long-term realize their true potential in life. Due to the importance of providing career counseling services to Higher Education students, it is beneficial both for counselors and administrators to better understand the advantages and drawbacks of each model of career intervention so that they can

use those ones that seem more effective according to their setting, students' specific needs/ goals as well as the intended outcomes.

This overview aims to provide researchers and practitioners with new insights on the topic of career counseling effectiveness, always with an emphasis on university students. First, we provide research evidence about career intervention effectiveness in general and report indicative findings on the impact of career counseling on university students. Then, we refer to the emergence of narrative and mixed (integrative) approaches and demonstrate recent research results on their effectiveness with university students. We critically discuss their potential, analyzing both their benefits and possible drawbacks for the career counseling process. Finally, based on recent relevant literature we make recommendations for ameliorating and extending evaluation research on career counseling effectiveness, demonstrating through a case study how specific tools and methods might be used to conduct and assess a career intervention in a sample of university students.

Effectiveness of career counseling interventions

Over the last decades, it has become well-established that career interventions generally produce a variety of positive outcomes with regard to career development on educational, economic, employment, and societal level (Hooley, 2014;). Spokane and Oliver's (1983) meta-analysis demonstrated that clients receiving various kinds of guidance and counseling showed on average a greater improvement of 81% considering outcomes such as career decidedness and career knowledge when compared to a control group lacking intervention. Later meta-analyses reached a medium effect size of 0.34 for career choice courses for adults (see Baker & Taylor, 1998), or mean effect sizes slightly above 0.30 across different career interventions regarding outcomes such as career decidedness, career exploration activities, or career knowledge (see Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Whiston et al., 1998, cf. Hirschi & Froidevaux, 2020). According to Whiston (2002) the strength of these effects is comparable to the effectiveness of other psychological interventions. However, it is not always clear what particular career interventions are meant to achieve, and this makes effectiveness evaluation quite puzzling. For example, is the aim of a guidance programme working with unemployed workers to get those individuals a job, or alternatively to support them in long-term career planning? It is possible that research might find that it was effective in one of

these aspirations, but not in both. Therefore, providing greater clarity about what career counseling is expected to achieve is valuable for developing quality interventions (Hooley, 2014).

No single research can ever describe an intervention's impact in full. However, some of the approaches that have been successfully implemented to describe processes and outcomes in career guidance and counseling are: *snapshots*: surveys, series of interviews or observations, *benchmarking*: taking a snapshot of what is happening and comparing it to a target or goal, *before-and-after studies*: taking two snapshots before and after implementation of a programme in order to identify changes as a result, *then-and-now studies*: asking participants to identify what has changed and to remember back what things were like before implementation, *longitudinal tracking*: ongoing engagement with research participants to explore the long-term impact, etc. (Hooley, 2014). Single-case design studies could also be of large benefit with respect to the types and outcomes of specific interventions (Sexton-Radek, 2014).

Effectiveness of career interventions with university students

Our review in the relevant literature showed that various interventions and approaches produce beneficial outcomes for university students. A recent meta-analysis (Langher et al., 2018) conducted on studies with college students published from 2000 to 2015 resulted in a large average weighted effect size of .80 (CI_{95%} = .54 to 1.06). A higher impact was found on the reduction of career indecision than on the increase of students' decision-making self-efficacy. Results of another recent meta-analysis (Ozlem, 2019) revealed that career interventions were associated with a large increase in students' levels of career decision-making self-efficacy.

Particularly, valid and theory-driven career courses targeted to university students seem to be quite effective. Implementing a quasi-experimental research design, Osborn et al. (2020) found that the students who attended a Cognitive Information Processing theory-based career course (experimental group) showed significant improvement in career decision state, cognitive information processing skills, career decision-making state, knowledge about next career steps and anxiety-reduction about current career concern, in contrast to the students in the control group (attending a course on human relations). A quasi-experimental longitudinal intervention study with first-year Malaysian college students (Lam & Santos, 2017) showed that upon completion of a

careers course, participants in the intervention group experienced increased career decision self-efficacy and reduced career indecision and related difficulties compared to the control group. Similarly, Picard (2012) testing the college program “Session d’accueil et d’intégration-SAI” in Québec (Canada) detected post-test reductions in academic and career indecision in the experimental group when he. Another research employing a sample of 116 clients from a university career center showed significant improvements in several scales of the Career Futures Inventory-Revised (Rottinghaus et al., 2012) after the counseling intervention (Rottinghaus et al., 2016). Moreover, a study in 289 French university students from various specialties revealed that although only a third of the students reported they were satisfied with the career counseling service they received, more than 90% noted some benefits particularly with regard to self-knowledge and career knowledge (Bernaud et al., 2010). Finally, it is interesting to note Milot-Lapointe et al.’s (2019) research findings with a sample of university students ($N=111$) The evaluation instrument of that research was the French version of the Outcome Questionnaire (OQ-30.2; Lambert et al., 2005) which assesses clients’ concerns in 3 life domains: subjective discomfort, problems in interpersonal relationships, and problems in social role satisfaction (work and student roles). The OQ-30.2 showed a high internal consistency of .93 for the total scale of the English version, and test-retest reliability at a 3-week interval was .84 (Lambert et al., 2005). In the Milot-Lapointe et al.’s (2019) sample, the Cronbach’s α was .92 for the total scale, while it ranged from .70 to .90 for the subscales. Milot-Lapointe et al.’s (2019) results suggested that individual career counseling may have a positive impact not only on students’ career development but on their life as well. A positive clinical change was observed between the first and the last career counseling session. Interestingly, through individual career counseling, about half of the participants (59 students) transcended from the “dysfunctional” into the “functional” range regarding the 3 life domains mentioned above as measured with OQ-30.2.

The emergence of narrative and mixed approaches in career counseling

The traditional, positivist career development theoretical approaches have been employed in counseling practice for more than a half of a century, aiming at the best possible matching between the individual and the environment, so that both workers and employers get satisfied (1st wave of career counseling) or concentrated on worker and other life roles (2nd wave) (Hartung & Santilli,

2018). An example of a tool that reflects the traditional matching approach is the Person-Job Fit scale (Brkich et al., 2002; Mylonas et al., 2011), amongst numerous others. However, career development no longer occurs in a stable and linear world of work, so some parameters may be neglected or masked under this traditional approach, no matter how useful it may be in other respects. Even more, the current socioeconomic variability challenges the completeness of most career development theories of the last century, resulting in the development and redevelopment of career assessment and counseling models (Watson, 2016). The focus of recent postmodern approaches (third wave) is on the formation of human knowledge and meaning through a constant interaction between individual and society (Hartung & Santilli, 2018). In particular, *Narrative Career Counseling* values subjectivity and active agency. Clients are empowered to construct a robust and solid autobiographical career narrative through a continuous re-authoring process (McMahon et al., 2020). In these approaches, despite the unavoidably limited N when relevant research is considered, individuals are treated as storied beings instead of only as holders of static traits like skills, interests, or values (Di Fabio, 2014).

A new trend -and also a challenge- concerns drawing upon the strengths of both quantitative career assessment and intervention and narrative career counseling according to clients' needs. In some cases, combining methods may be useful in order to surpass as many caveats stemming from each approach separately as possible. Such integrative approaches accord equal value and relevance to both quantitative and qualitative assessment and intervention (Maree, 2018). Although tests are still used widely in practice and research with favorable outcomes, their integration with qualitative methods could elevate the evaluation of clients' traits (interests, values, etc.) to a level of sophistication able to provide meaningful explanations for particular outcomes (Ambiel, 2020). In order to foster individuals' self-development we need to augment the objective career assessment methods by narratives, not replace them. Amundson (2006) contends that the counseling continuum should start with some of the more traditional career counseling methods and then go beyond them to include other, more dynamic approaches, such as metaphor or story telling. Such an approach would capitalize on all positive characteristics –metric and counseling ones– stemming separately from the “traditional” and the narrative approach.

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of narrative and mixed career counseling interventions (general population)

Narrative approaches of career counseling present numerous benefits. While there are also several limitations, which counselors need to be aware of, their use in career counseling has long been advocated. Their major advantage is that they help clients reflect on their experience, rather than rely mainly on the profiles and results of psychometric tests that may be problematic in diverse contexts (Maree, 2010). However, meaningful interpretations of narrations should take advantage of and also remain within the specific psychosocial and cultural context (Tuval-Mashiach, 2014). Relevant literature provides some evidence about the effectiveness of career counseling tools and techniques that belong to the traditional paradigm (i.e. Masdonati et al., 2009; Perdrix et al., 2012); while, narrative approaches are also related with important outcome indicators for various client populations (Froidevaux, 2018). Most of the published studies with respect to examining narrative-based approaches fall into the Life Design paradigm (Hirschi & Froidevaux, 2020). The Life Design approach has its foundation on social constructivism's epistemology and acknowledges that career development is highly contextualized and individualized. It emphasizes that all the life spheres that are relevant to that person have to be considered for the constructions of career and life projects (Nota & Rossier, 2015; Santilli et al., 2021). Narratability also plays a significant role in this approach; asking clients to produce micronarratives about how they have developed and constructed their self, identity, and career, promotes new meanings to their difficulties, thus triggering change emancipation processes (Savickas, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009).

A compilation of the evaluation studies regarding narrative career counseling interventions follows: Reid and West (2011) in their qualitative study examined the feedback given by 8 career counselors as well as by 10 young clients with different characteristics (e.g. students in transition, unemployed people) in a career intervention guided by the Life Design approach (Savickas et al., 2009). Counselors provided a positive evaluation of the intervention. Some of them noted: "*It was a powerful tool that helped me motivate counselees so that they think deeper and in unexpected ways*". Counselees' feedback was also positive: "*Yes, it was certainly useful-(...) it made me think more, rather than making hasty decisions*".

Some studies have reported the effectiveness of the life design approach through *increased career adaptability* among Italian middle school students by using an online life design career

intervention group (Nota et al., 2016), as well as among South African adolescents by employing group-based life design counseling sessions (Maree & Symington, 2015). Another group life design intervention targeted to unemployed young adults also proved effective in improving the scores on career concern, career control, as well as the total score on Career Adapt-abilities Scale (CAAS; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) in the target group ($N=62$) after the intervention process (Maree et al., 2019). The CAAS (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) seems to be a useful instrument for measuring career adaptability resources as there is clear evidence in various countries and contexts for its validity and reliability. Its four-factor structure is retained across measurements in different populations (e.g. Hou et al., 2012; Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2018; Tolentino et al., 2014). Convergent validity of CAAS has been supported in many studies through strong positive relations of the instrument with a plethora of work- and life-related variables such as meaning in life (Yuen & Yau, 2015), vocational exploration (Porfeli & Savickas, 2012), perceived career self-efficacy and career resilience (Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2015), courage (Sovet et al., 2018) and self-esteem (Sidiropoulou et al., 2018). This scale has also shown good internal reliability coefficients ranging in most contexts from $\alpha=.70$ to $\alpha=.90$ for the total scale and the subscales (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Beneficial results of life design interventions on the *career decision-making process* have been demonstrated as well. Specifically, a decrease in career decision-making difficulties (i.e., lack of information and inconsistent information) and an increase in career decision-making self-efficacy have been found in a sample of Italian entrepreneurs who participated in life design counseling sessions (Rehfluss & Di Fabio, 2012).

Additionally, Cardoso et al. (2018) using mixed methods of assessment, showed that a group life design intervention was effective in terms of generating both quantitative and qualitative outcomes in 3rd grade junior high school students and 3rd grade senior high school students ($N=236$). The narrative tool “My Career Story (MCS; Savickas & Hartung, 2012)” was employed in this intervention. My Career Story (Savickas & Hartung, 2012) is an autobiographical workbook used in the Life Design career counseling approach, containing three parts: (1) “Telling My Story,” (2) “Hearing My Story,” and (3) “Enacting My Story”. The first part helps with defining the client’s problem, outlining expectations for the intervention, and compiling a list of occupations that the client has considered taking up. The second part supports the identification of career and life themes through four questions about: (1) role models, (2) books and movies fitting the current

script, (3) magazines or TV shows reflecting interests, and (4) sayings or mottos for self-guidance. This part ends up with reconstruction and renarration of the story. Finally, the third part of the workbook, focuses on defining goals and identifying resources for their implementation (Savickas & Hartung, 2012). More specifically, Cardoso et al.'s (2018) study highlighted the potential of MCS for interventions with groups of adolescents since it yielded positive effects on career certainty and career self-efficacy beliefs. On the qualitative track, participants in focus groups ($N=33$) highlighted the usefulness of that tool in developing a sense of direction, enhancing self-disclosure and self-awareness as well as promoting a sense of continuity in individuals among the past, the present and the future.

Yet, to our knowledge, there are only few studies that evaluate the effectiveness of mixed career interventions (employing both quantitative and qualitative tools). For example, Maree (2019) examined the impact of a career intervention, that included both a career construction approach and administration of psychometric tools, on students' career adaptability. As expected, scores increased for all career adaptability dimensions. A method for integrating storytelling and quantitative career assessment has recently been coined (McMahon et al., 2020), the Integrative Structured Interview (ISI), which is a qualitative practical application of the story telling approach to career counselling (McMahon & Watson, 2012). It can be described as a systemic interview that provides a structured process within which clients can reflect on the meaning and relatedness of themes in their lives. The ISI consists of thirteen story crafting questions based on the Self-Directed Search (SDS) that are asked across six sections. The focus of this kind of interview is to unpack the clients' stories that are embedded in their quantitative scores (McMahon et al., 2020). Therefore, it integrates narratives in the process, based on the clients' quantitative test-scores, with the aim of enhancing reflection on past experiences. McMahon et al. (2020) tested the effectiveness of this new intervention with a single client (Nadya). Selected examples of Nadya's reflections were *"It's good, actually, because it makes you really think through in great detail and break it down into those categories"*, (...) and *"So I was thinking back to the past a bit, but also thinking forward"*. The effectiveness of the ISI as a narrative interview in helping clients elicit rich narratives that complement initial scores from an interest questionnaire (i.e. the SDS) was also demonstrated in a study with adult career changers (McMahon et al., 2018). The findings suggested that narrative career counselling (through the use of ISI) may be useful for adult career changers and that the ISI could provide a model for career psychologists who support them.

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of narrative and mixed (integrative) career counseling interventions (university students)

Evidence of the positive impact of narrative or mixed (integrative) career interventions on university students has been provided from several recent studies. Barclay and Stoltz (2016), using a life-design group, reported a decrease in career indecision and an increase in readiness for making career decisions about an academic major among US undergraduate students. Obi (2015) employed a pretest-posttest control group design in order to examine the effectiveness of a six-session constructionist career counseling intervention (Savickas, 2011) with 50 undergraduates aged between 19 and 25. Significant reductions were noted in indecision, anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity about career choices for the intervention group, in contrast to the control group. Eight weeks later, the reductions in the aforementioned outcomes were slightly yet significantly greater. Furthermore, a study by McKay et al. (2005) revealed that provision of career counseling interventions based on Chaos Theory of Careers (Bright & Pryor, 2011) to a group of university students generated equally positive effects with a traditional “trait-and-factor” type intervention that was delivered to another group of students. It is noteworthy that in the experimental group positive results were sustained for a larger time period.

The narrative-based career counseling intervention titled “Constructing my future purposeful life” (Di Fabio, 2015) aims to help individuals discover their authentic roles, that is, roles they wish to prioritize and enact in their lives in order to feel more satisfied. To meet this purpose, clients complete activities such as the career genogram, which provide an opportunity for connecting past and present themes and influences with a view to designing their future (Di Fabio, 2015). The effectiveness of this relatively new narrative career intervention was tested through a pre-post experimental design in its group version (see audience methodology) (Di Fabio, 2015). In the audience methodology (that is used in a group counseling mode) there are times in which participants complete individually written exercises and times in which they interact individually with the career counselor in a circle, while the rest listen as an audience but do not intervene. Thirty six university students comprised the experimental group while 37 students received no counseling support (control group). The qualitative tool “Future Career Autobiography” (FCA, Rehfuss, 2009) was used to evaluate narrative change outcomes. The FCA is administered before and after narrative interventions and allows for the detection of qualitative change in personal and career

motives, values, and future goals (Kenny & Di Fabio, 2018). The FCA presents clients with a written exercise about where one hopes to be in life and what he/she hopes to be doing occupationally five years from now” (Rehfuss & Di Fabio, 2012). Rehfuss and Di Fabio (2012)’s quasi-experimental study supported the validity of the FCA as it was found that the participants of the experimental group (40 Italian female entrepreneurs) who received a Life design-based career intervention showed a significant narrative movement in the post FCAs from general to more specific life and occupational themes. On the other hand, Kenny and Di Fabio (2018) argue that although the FCA is useful in assessing the effectiveness of narrative interventions, it enables researchers to assess only broad changes.

In Di Fabio’s (2015) study, the analysis showed upgrading of the experimental group’s narratives about self, life and career goals, enhanced self-awareness and a more concise description of their subjective identities system (systems of preferred roles). Also, an increase of both positive self-concept and goal authenticity scores was observed after the intervention (Di Fabio, 2015).

Likewise to general population, research exploring the effectiveness of *mixed career counseling approaches* in university students is limited. It is vital for young individuals to be engaged in dialogue, self-reflection and meta-reflection with respect to finding meaning in their current studies, their future life and career. The aforementioned parameters have been shown to be active and amenable to change in a recent evaluation research of a mixed (integrative) career counseling intervention based on combination of several qualitative and quantitative techniques (Maree, 2018). A 1st-year university student experiencing career indecision served as the case study. Both qualitative and quantitative assessments demonstrated that the intervention supported the student in identifying dominant life and career themes and then, choose a course of study that would connect work with his entire life design. Di Fabio and Maree (2013) in their quasi-experimental research observed the effectiveness of a group-based, mixed (integrative) career intervention, including examination and dialogue based on biographical details, family influences, career category preferences as well as career-story narratives, in a sample of students from the University of Florence, Italy. Those participating in the experimental group showed a clearer mind with respect to life and occupational goals after the intervention, in conjunction with a decrease in career decision-making difficulties and an increase in career decision-making self-efficacy.

Discussion

The necessity of implementing narrative and mixed (integrative) career counseling with university students

For more than a decade, the world is going through an intense socio-economic crisis, which has globally resulted in high rates of youth unemployment that prevent graduates from pursuing careers and lives away from their family home, along with delays experienced by youth populations as they seek to enter the labor market (Briddick et al., 2019). Briddick et al. (2019) claim that “the youth of the world are as in need now of career-related services as ever before, if perhaps not more” (p. 251). As we see it, this is exactly the point where lies the great potential in broadening career counseling practice by using emerging career counseling approaches, either narrative or mixed (integrative). Life and career transitions that university students are confronted with are demanding and narrative career interventions may support them to find consistency and cohesion based on their life narratives, reinstating the element of uniqueness of each individual into play (Peila-Shuster, 2016).

Narrative career counseling interventions may support youth in dealing effectively with career-related challenges as they value multiple subjective reality interpretations embedded in their narratives regarding rapid transitions (Kaliris & Kriwas, 2014). Furthermore, these approaches help towards broadening individuals’ perspective instead of limiting it, by connecting their traits with those of the work environment, which is just one example. Langher et al.’s (2018) meta-analysis revealed better outcomes for socio-constructivist interventions compared to other social-cognitive ones, based on traditional person-environment fit models which serve a large number of clients as they are much less time-consuming per client, but they do so possibly to a shallower extent. At the same time, narrative interventions may be capable of highlighting the dimensions of work that nurture essential human needs (e.g. social connections and self-determination) (Duarte et al., 2019). Another advantage relates with their emphasis on counselees’ empowerment regarding career management as opposed to the traditional deficit model (Stebbleton, 2010).

An emerging trend in the career counseling field refers to exploiting mixed (integrative) interventions. Mixed approaches are mainly associated with career assessment strategies. From Maree and Gerrits’s (2019) perspective, contemporary effective career counseling practices

should contain fragments from vocational guidance, career development (modern, positivist) as well as the postmodern (narrative, constructivist, life design) paradigm. A combination of storytelling and quantitative career assessment might enable young adults to contextualise, make sense of and learn from their scores, decisions, transitions, past and present influences, as well as to set more specific career and life goals (Maree, 2018; McMahan et al., 2020; Sampson et al., 2015). Thus, we believe there is a need for career counselors to include mixed (integrative) interventions in their practice when such an option is appropriate for a client, based on the respective specific features of each case. However, it is essential to find more comprehensive, solid and sophisticated ways to integrate scores and stories in order to provide a safe reflection space for clients (McMahan et al., 2020).

Although recent research indicates that narrative career counseling approaches are promising, still there is a lack of considerable amount of evaluation studies, with respect to mixed (integrative) interventions. More so, further research should be done on their impact on students, using both quantitative and qualitative measures of assessment (see for example, Maree & Gerrits, 2019). Further research is also needed to establish the efficacy of new integrative interview approaches, like the Integrative Structured Interview (ISI) (McMahan et al., 2020). Accordingly, assessment attempts should examine for which cases this kind of intervention may prove most appropriate. For instance, it is possible that integrative approaches are more effective when Higher Education students search for meaning in their career paths or deal with a major transition, but less appropriate when the focus is on taking immediate decisions regarding studies or work. Moreover, there is a need for structured training and supervision for practitioners who want to integrate differing methods and tools (Sampson et al., 2015).

Possible challenges and drawbacks of narrative career counseling

Besides their potential, a career practitioner should also consider and carefully address a number of caveats related to the implementation of narrative-based approaches if he/ she aims to apply them in career counseling. First, narrative-based approaches are more time-consuming than the traditional ones because they explore clients' issues in greater depth. This could have an effect on some clients' satisfaction level from the counseling intervention, especially on those who seek fast solutions to their career-related difficulties (Stebbleton, 2010). In addition, the reliance on dialog

and self-reflection might limit their applicability to special populations such as immigrants or those with lower educational level, who can hardly articulate their personal narratives (Reid, 2005). Difficulties to apply narrative approaches become more intense when specific counseling settings demand short term intervention. Finally, the shrinkage of the economic activity in various sectors due to the consecutive lockdowns taken globally against the COVID-19 pandemic (Drosos et al., 2021), can act as an impediment for those in need of holistic career services but not being able to afford the high cost of an extensive narrative intervention.

Assessing career intervention effectiveness for university students: Why and how?

A critical challenge for career counseling in the 21st century is to strengthen its evidence base (McMahon et al., 2020), as policy makers and governments demand measurable indicators that can justify funding of relevant services. Thus, there is high need of conducting more studies to evaluate career intervention effectiveness, especially in student populations. This would allow the detection of the most successful and promising treatment characteristics and modalities. For example, researchers might want to test the specific role of moderators previously considered in the literature such as career intervention *length* and *outcomes*. It seems crucial for researchers to identify what works best for each type of client (Whiston & Rahardja, 2008). For instance, Milot-Lapointe et al. (2019) found a variability in university students' responses measuring changes in career, relational and personal issues after career counseling sessions.

Generally, it seems that individual counseling has the strongest effects per session but, this is also the most expensive and time-consuming approach. Since little is known about *group career counseling interventions*, more studies are needed to assess their effectiveness (Whiston et al., 2017). Research in university students could also examine the value of structured career workshops since Whiston et al. (2003) have demonstrated these are significantly more effective than unstructured ones.

Based on the significance for university students of receiving appropriate high-quality career counseling services it would be beneficial to comparatively examine the potential of distinct career interventions specialized for this target group. Such an endeavor seems vital, given that the effectiveness of interventions may vary depending on different theoretical career counseling models, which have not been taken into account in past meta-analytic studies (i.e., see Langher et

al., 2018). Additionally, placing emphasis on designing and assessing career interventions for university students may profit them not only with respect to career-related concerns but also on personal issues as well—at least in an indirect way (Milot-Lapointe et al., 2019).

Spokane and Nguen (2016) suggest refinement of the traditional process paradigm, claiming for complementarity between different types of intervention and assessment methodologies (quantitative and qualitative) in view of the substantial need for services and the limits on available resources. Accordingly, the emergence of new intervention models has created the necessity for administering qualitative instruments specifically developed to identify changes in clients' narratives, such as the Future Career Autobiography (FCA; Rehfuss, 2009), before and after participation in interventions (Di Fabio, 2014). Such an approach is indispensable as qualitative evaluation instruments are required to assess the qualitative changes in self-narratives instead of quantitative tools which are unable to do so (Rehfuss & Di Fabio, 2012).

A scenario of a career effectiveness evaluation research in higher education students

A proposed scenario of an informative evaluation research including mixed methods both in the intervention and in the assessment process phase might compare three distinct career intervention perspectives in terms of produced outcomes in a group of university students: i) a narrative, ii) a traditional-“psychometric” -based on administration of tests (measuring interests, values, skills etc.)- and iii) a mixed (integrative) intervention employing both tests and a narrative process based on dialogue and reflection regarding career and life themes. This last perspective might include the Integrated Structured Interview (McMahon et al., 2020) or a combination of tests that would be administered early in the process (about interests, skills etc.) and then, implementation of the narrative activities adhering to the “Constructing my future purposeful life” (Di Fabio, 2015).

Outcomes could be assessed through both quantitative and qualitative tools. Regarding the quantitative dimension, a set of common traditional constructs in career counseling could be used, including, but not limited to, *decision-making self-efficacy* (via CDMSE, Taylor & Betz, 1983), *career decision-making difficulties* (via CDDQ, Gati et al., 2000), *dysfunctional career beliefs* (via DCB, Hechtlinger et al., 2017), *perceived self-efficacy in career planning* (via PSECS, Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2015). All of the above instruments have demonstrated adequate reliability and validity coefficients across several studies and could be safely applied in an

evaluation research. On the other hand, possible narrative changes might be assessed by a qualitative tool such as FCA (Rehfuss, 2009). The entire set of tools could be administered to students, before and after the interventions so that pre- post- comparisons are possible. As to the post-treatment measurement, an option would be to deliver both the “quant” and “qual” instruments in one or more different time points, ranging for example, from one to six months after the occurrence of the career counseling interventions. This would allow for better understanding the fluctuation as well as the various qualities of the effects that each treatment may have on Higher Education students through the time. We may assume that one -or all- of the aforementioned approaches (most likely, the narrative or the mixed one) would provoke reflection about future plans and career expectations; a process that may need more time to be developed. Evaluation research designs like the above would generate a more comprehensive assessment of young people’s possible changes both in career and life design as a result of the specific type of career intervention they received.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to synthesize recent research findings regarding the effectiveness of emerging career counseling approaches, placing particular emphasis on university students. This particular population faces critical career transitions and therefore, needs targeted and holistic career services. The literature review showed that beyond the traditional-quantitative approach, various career counseling interventions that fall into the narrative paradigm, as well as the mixed (integrative) approaches, seem to be quite effective. However, this may also be contingent on the modalities being used in each case (e.g. group mode, one-on-one counseling, life-design approaches) as well as the various needs of clients. Research endeavors like this are essential for the sustainability of the field since many third parties (e.g. funding agents, governmental personnel, advisory boards) are requiring documentation that vocational or career services generate important outcomes (Whiston et al., 2003).

We emphasized the necessity of ameliorating and extending the variety of career counseling approaches, techniques and interventions to be used specifically with university students. Narratives as well as mixed (integrative) career interventions, seem to have great potential in supporting youth realize career and life goals and facilitate meaning-making. We also endorse the

contemporary view that quantitative and qualitative career assessment both serve their purpose and should not be viewed as contradictory but as complimentary, for the best interests of the clients (Sampson et al., 2015). Combining different paradigms, would help counselors and clients take advantage of the strengths of each one. However, further research is vital to determine under what circumstances and for what kind of clients' needs each approach is most effective.

Researchers should pay attention on designing methodologically rigorous and sophisticated evaluation studies (Spokane & Nguen, 2016). It is also suggested they employ a variety of outcome criteria and tools that would be congruent with career and life design needs of people in the 21st century. Most importantly, quasi-experimental (or even experimental) studies, using both qualitative and quantitative measures are essential in order to compare processes and outcomes among various traditional and promising novel approaches at the individual and group level.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project “Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers - 2nd Cycle” (MIS-5033021), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).

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