

# Using Life Design With Vulnerable Youth

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Career counseling processes normed for Western contexts may not fully address the needs of vulnerable youth in disadvantaged, non-Western contexts. Therefore, this study examined the utility of a narrative career counseling process within the life-design paradigm for assisting a former street child to successfully shape his future career narrative. Report of a case study suggested that the life-design process assisted the client in designing a future career narrative that would enhance his quality of life. Although the study is based on 1 particular case, the findings may have significance for improving career counseling for vulnerable individuals.

*Keywords:* career narrative, life design, narrative career counseling, resilience, street child

A large segment of the South African population lives in poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2013), which severely limits their life and career choices. This suggests a need for career counseling processes alternative to those developed for contexts where further education and formal employment are easier to access (Maree, 2013a). The challenge with career counseling developed from a Western perspective (Akhurst & Mkhize, 2006) is that it has relevance for only a small proportion of South Africans: those who attended better resourced education institutions and who possess the necessary level of social capital required to navigate the employment market (Watson, 2010). Vulnerable, poverty-stricken individuals experience huge obstacles in this regard (Maree, 2013b).

Psychometric career assessments normed for more affluent Western contexts (Maree, 2013b) tend to be based on theories that are not congruent with the social structures, value systems, and economic realities of vulnerable populations, such as South African street children (Ward & Seager, 2010), who experience severe socioeconomic challenges as a daily reality (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003). Their disrupted schooling does not allow them to benefit from traditional psychometric career assessments, because they lack work-related information and career planning skills that typically are gained through a better quality school experience (Malindi & Machenjedze, 2012). As with other vulnerable populations, street children generally lack the necessary social capital and skills for accessing relevant community resources that would allow them to become employable, and,

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additionally, they are not easily able to access skills training or further qualifications (Malindi & Machenjedge, 2012).

Fortunately, recent developments in career counseling theory and practice, including advancement of the life-design paradigm (Savickas et al., 2009), have potential benefits for children from backgrounds characterized by poor and unstable schooling. Maree (2013a) referred to a new wave in career counseling theory and practice “aimed at empowering clients to reflect on their life stories in order to identify their main life themes on the basis of which they can construct their careers” (p. 19). This narrative approach is set within a philosophical framework that puts ownership of the process with the client. Clients relate and then recreate personal narratives that influence the career choices they make (Savickas, 2011). The counselor guides this process using purposeful activities (Maree, 2007) with regular reflections so that clients can identify assets and challenges in their narratives to construct alternative future narratives (Maree, 2013a).

The present case study examined the relevance of a narrative career counseling approach (Maree, 2013a) for former street children. We were interested in how a late adolescent, recently from the streets, might be assisted to design an alternative, more hopeful future career narrative. In addressing the question, we first outline the theoretical framework of a narrative approach (Maree, 2007). We then describe the research methodology and discuss the process. We conclude by discussing the significance of a narrative approach (Maree, 2007) for use with a former street child.

## **Theoretical Framework and Counseling Process**

Narrative career counseling acknowledges clients’ distinctive individual realities (Chen, 2007; Maree, 2007). In so doing, clients develop an appreciation for their past experiences that then motivate them to deconstruct, reconstruct, and coconstruct their life narratives (Savickas, 2011). A narrative approach conceptualizes individuals in their entirety to create a meaningful fit between personal experience and occupational identity (Watson, 2010). An international team conceived the life-design paradigm, which advances the use of narrative career intervention methods (Savickas et al., 2009). Within this paradigm, narrative methods aim to link personal narratives to career development processes (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2006). The life-design paradigm acknowledges that social interaction and life experience influence individual identity and that, through interactive counseling processes, the individual’s life purpose and values become apparent to the client (Maree, 2013a; Savickas et al., 2009). This has potential value for individuals from diverse contexts beyond what standardized Western psychometric assessments might offer (Watson, 2010). This process potentially provides an opportunity for clients from challenging circumstances to reflect on their unique life themes to guide career decisions from an asset-based perspective (Maree, 2007).

Narrative counseling processes aim to guide clients to become reflective, look beyond the surface of their stories, and probe their life experiences and emotions to give purpose and meaning to their unique life stories (Maree, 2007). Clients come to realize that, just as intention, action, and meaning are flexible, so career narratives can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, leading to conscious improved decision making for the future (Savickas et al., 2009). The process allows individuals from challenging contexts with little positive

support and resources to access pathways to achieve sustainable growth that is linked to their personal narratives and identity (Maree, 2013a).

In narrative career counseling, the counselor guides clients in identifying repeated themes from their different life events (Savickas, 2011), which then become the golden threads that shape future, hope-filled career decisions. The reframed themes are added to the client's existing narrative to enrich and extend it (Maree, 2013a). Each activity facilitated by the counselor is followed by a collaborative reflection on the meaning it had for the client. The present case study implemented a hybrid approach to narrative career counseling (Maree, 2007) with a client by combining the Career Construction Interview (CCI; Savickas, 2011) with other life-design methods, as noted in Table 1 (Guichard, 2013; Maree, 2013a). Case study research allows for deep exploration that may not be achievable in group contexts (Savickas, 2011), allowing the counselor-researcher to become immersed in the client's context and to establish rapport. This is significant, because themes of instability and mistrust are typical of street life and discourage trusting relationships (Ward & Seager, 2010).

## Method

### Participant

We selected Tom (a pseudonym chosen by the participant), who was keen to participate, for our individual case study (Creswell, 2009). We obtained Tom's informed written consent to publish this case study. He completed a consent form at the beginning of the process, which has been stored with all original data. Tom came to the shelter 8 months before our interaction. His personal narrative, as told by Tom during the lifeline activity (see the Interventions section), started in a small east coast town of South Africa, where Tom and his mother and siblings experienced material deprivation and severe abuse by his father. As a result, Tom ran away from home at the age of 14. He initially lived on the streets of a nearby large coastal city, after which he moved more inland and survived for 4 years on the streets of two of the largest neighboring cities in the country. Tom was then recruited by a conservative Islamic organization. According to Tom, he was discouraged from pursuing secular (Western) education. He was unhappy about this, because he valued secular education. Therefore, he left the Islamic institution to go back to the streets again before joining the Catholic shelter, which was where we met and started interacting. Tom indicated that he would like assistance with career choices that would allow him to achieve his goal of helping others, who, like his mother and siblings, are unable to help themselves.

### Interventions

The following activities constituted the interventions for the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009) with Tom:

1. The initial interview consisting of CCI questions (Savickas, 2011).
2. A lifeline to ascertain assets and themes from Tom's life story. Significant positive and hurtful personal life events were plotted on a line graph (Fritz & Beekman, 2007).

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of a Life-Design Process With Activities and Data Sources**

<b>Step in the Life-Design Process</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Data Source</b>
Interview client to understand aim of the process	Career Construction Interview (Savickas, 2011)	The transcribed interview
Facilitate client reflection on identity and function through articulating client experience and relationships to others; through reflective questions, help client create links between previous life narratives and future aspirations	Lifeline—significant personal life events are plotted on a line graph (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) Genogram indicating relationships and life roles of family members to look for themes and career role models (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) Picture collages depicting personal interests, hopes, and goals (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) Genogram (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) Collages (Fritz & Beekman, 2007)	The visual lifeline from the activities Transcription of reflective discussion after each activity
Make narratives explicit by reflecting with client to view narratives from new perspectives and to express dreams that were previously not realized due to circumstances; new perspective allows client to revitalize dreams and to reauthor the future	Future career road map (career mapping)—client creates future life and career goals with time frames and identifies available resources to achieve goals (Fritz & Beekman, 2007)	The visual product from the road map activity
Facilitate client to place original narrative within newly reauthored perspective to integrate previous identity with possible future narrative	Card sorting—client receives 40 cards for sorting in order of career preference (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) Future career road map A semistructured exit interview	Transcription from discussion of the road map, card-sorting activity, and exit interview
Collaborate with client to concretely plan how to move from current reality to desired reality and identify contextual resources to support the process	Follow-up communication between client and counselor	Conversations between counselor and client after completion of the life-design process
Summarize the process to crystallize and find the way forward in a tangible form so that client can refer to it in the future		
Gauge success of life-design process through short- and long-term follow-up through transitional period		

*Note.* The steps in the left column are adapted from Savickas et al. (2009). Activities are agreed on by client and counselor, followed by client reflection of the activity.

3. A family genogram indicating relationships and life roles of family members, to look for themes and career role models that may reflect Tom's personal values and career interests (Fritz & Beekman, 2007).
4. Picture collages depicting Tom's personal interests, hopes, and goals, and to guide us to the client's image of himself (Fritz & Beekman, 2007).
5. Career card sorting, where Tom categorized occupation cards with brief career descriptions according to jobs he "would consider," "not consider," or "was uncertain" about (Fritz & Beekman, 2007).
6. Career mapping, where Tom used the metaphor of the streets, to visually map out his future life goals and anticipated challenges with time frames, based on the principles of his lifeline narrative.
7. An open-ended exit interview to reflect on the activities and narrative career process (Maree, 2007) that we had explored together with Tom.

### Procedure

The counselor (first author), who was an intern educational psychologist, followed the steps of the life-design process outlined earlier and in Table 1 to collaboratively design a future career narrative based on Tom's past. During this process, we used various narrative career activities (Maree, 2007) aligned with steps of the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009) to generate data. We identified themes from the transcripts of the life-design process using an inductive open-coding method (Creswell, 2009). Each life-design activity and related reflection was analyzed separately for codes relating to aspects that were relevant for the life-design process. The counselor verified the themes with Tom (Mertens, 2009) before collaboratively exploring them during counseling for their potential to help Tom flourish in his future career path (Savickas, 2011).

We strictly adhered to the ethical standards of the relevant tertiary institution and the Health Professions Council of South Africa. We obtained written consent for the research project from the participant and his caregivers, with permission to report the findings anonymously. The counselor was always cognizant of the ethics that accompany the role duality and the associated power relationships when the researcher simultaneously holds a professional working role. We ensured trustworthiness through the use of multiple sources of data generation, independent recoding of data, and verification by the client (Mertens, 2009). We ensured theoretical validity by aligning the data with the life-design process (Pulkkinen, 2003; Savickas et al., 2009).

### Results and Discussion

Three themes emerged directly from Tom's narratives. Specifically, Tom had begun to recognize assets and resources, develop awareness of his personal values and life goals, and identify changing patterns of the past. Together, these themes contributed to a fourth theme: Tom's acknowledgment of the value of the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009) for career planning. The themes are interlinked as the golden

thread to guide the client toward a long-term future career identity, because the deeply reflexive life-design activities cannot be understood in isolation or in linear fashion.

### **Theme 1: Recognizing Assets and Resources**

During the CCI and the genogram and lifeline activities, Tom was able to reflect on how people and events motivated and supported him during the bad times at home and also during his life on the streets. His reflections allowed him to acknowledge the assets and resources within himself and his reality, which, in turn, motivate him to be a support to others in future. These reflections indicated that Tom was able to use past experiences to build on his new identity and to reflect on how his past experiences can benefit himself and others (Savickas et al., 2009). He was able to recognize assets and resources within himself and his broader reality (Maree, 2013a), placing his problematic narrative into this newly authored perspective. All of the life-design activities involved aspects of this first theme. Tom's awareness of his intrinsic and acquired assets and resources (Savickas et al., 2009) were evident when he said the following in the intake interview:

In my family, we were poor, and the way we used to live was not nice. Now, there are other people struggling like my family. So, it will be easy for me to understand their problem. . . . I think it will help me to work with people. My interest is to help people.

He recognized his ability to empathize, which is crucial for any helping profession.

After direct questions from the counselor, Tom constructed collages that indicated he was aware of personal skills and was beginning to see himself as a leader and someone who is able to act on behalf of others. Tom created collages (available from the first author) with labels and magazine pictures, such as motivating slogans, images of his political heroes/role models, and social situations he would like to address, all of which symbolized his future goals and dreams. The focus of these collages was on community development, government structures as resources, and leadership. He recognized how existing structures could be used for his dream of developing communities to help themselves. He said: "I see politics is interesting, and I think it can help me with my dream" [collage]. Tom created a personal visual future road map from 2010 to 2030, indicating his future achievements and possible challenges: "Like if you go to rural areas, people are good, but they don't have money to farm. So I will help them buy seeds and equipment to plant" [future road map]. He focused also on further study, marriage with children, and community development projects.

Through a card-sorting activity, which the counselor facilitated with strategic questions, Tom was able to explore careers that would enable him to achieve his goal of helping others, which was concretized during the collage and future road map activities (Fritz & Beekman, 2007). Thus, Tom became aware that he could access community resources to help him attain his dream of helping others at different levels and different periods in his future life narrative. Tom said about the process: "It

made things more clear.” He indicated that he needed to interact more with people who are already involved in the career options he wanted to explore in order to help others: “I know enough about the police force. Now I would like to go to the Department of Health or Welfare and Justice Department to find out more about social work and to become a lawyer” [reflection]. This links with the second theme, through which career goals and life goals are aligned.

## **Theme 2: Developing Awareness of Personal Values and Life Goals**

During earlier sessions, Tom had expressed uncertainty about how he wanted to achieve his existing goal of helping others. His later reflections indicated that the process helped him to develop deeper awareness of his values and goals, thereby improving self-knowledge that then informed his career plans (Savickas et al., 2009):

It [the life-design process] has helped me to realize my dreams and future plans. Like, I know now how I am going to help others. It has helped me to know myself. Like it says in the collage: “I AM A LEADER.”

During card sorting, he identified careers in law enforcement, religious ministry, and social work as fitting with his life goal of developing his leadership ability to help others. Tom valued formal and informal education as a means to achieve this goal: “It was painful not to go to school, but it was not bad at madressah [Islamic institution]. Those people there taught me life” [lifeline]. This value is also suggested when he said: “I went to look after the cows of some colored people. That helped me with money for school . . . that’s why it made me happy” [lifeline].

By reflecting on his past family life through a genogram activity, Tom was able to realize that he did not want to perpetuate the negative family values that he had observed in his family. As someone who had experienced and survived abuse by his father, he believed he was well placed to help others in a similar situation. His commitment to positive family values, education, and caring for others was clearly aligned with his desire to choose occupations that involved caring for and protecting people. He said, “I would like to be better than them [family members] . . . I will not hit my children . . . I will encourage my small brother and sister to go to school,” and “I admire my mother . . . she protected us when my father wanted to kill us.” This theme links with Step 3 in the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009; Table 1), in which new perspectives allowed Tom to vocalize previously silenced stories that he could now reauthor and revise for his future. He began to focus on his mother’s behavior rather than his father’s abuse as a guide for his parenting role in future (Maree, 2013a).

## **Theme 3: Changing Patterns of the Past**

According to the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009), articulation makes the narratives concrete, allowing the client to objectively view the old painful narratives from new perspectives (Maree, 2013b). Tom became aware of how his coping mechanisms in the past guided solutions to challenges in the future: “I ran away from home to come to Joburg because of the situation at home. If I continued to stay at

home then . . . perhaps worse things could have happened” [lifeline]. He also said, “At home, we were very poor, so we went to other families to beg for food” [lifeline]. Tom initially felt embarrassed about these experiences [reflection by counselor during the lifeline activity], but the process helped reframe these perceptions to help him understand that these were survival techniques that, in fact, show resilience (Malindi & Machenjedge, 2012). His actions and choices for the future suggested that he had developed awareness of his resilience and also how to access resources to overcome challenges (Ungar, 2010). In this quest, he decided to join the police force as a reservist as soon as he finished Grade 12 and thereafter explore his other career options using the resources available through the police force. Tom requested assistance from the counselor, as a systemic asset (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2006), with obtaining a driver’s license that would allow him access to a career in the police force. At this point, he was actively and consciously reconstructing past narratives (Maree, 2007).

The lifeline activity encouraged Tom to reflect on his past, and he realized both positive and hurtful patterns. He indicated that the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009) guided him to understand his past in a different way that now encouraged him to do things differently [exit interview]. Tom’s childhood experiences motivated him to not repeat his father’s violent tendencies and his brother’s criminal activities [genogram activity]. He said, “It helps me to know how to deal with problems in a better way than them” [reflection on genogram activity]. This theme has bearing on the career options he chose (i.e., law enforcement, religious ministry, social work, and law). This also related to his life goal of helping others. Tom stated that he understood himself and his family better [exit interview] and could use what he learned to guide the way forward and improve on his past realities (Fritz & Beekman, 2007).

Through the process, Tom became aware of past mistakes and resolved not to repeat them. Much of Tom’s time and effort was spent thinking about how he could do things better, not only for himself, but also for his family and community at large. This process had a direct bearing on his career choices. His inclination toward social justice guided him toward law enforcement and social work. His resources at that point did not allow for university study, because he chose to leave the shelter for personal reasons after completing Grade 12. The future career road map created by Tom integrated his new knowledge of himself based on his life narrative with occupational information to design a future career plan that had meaning and relevance for all of his realities in the future.

#### **Theme 4: Acknowledging the Value of the Life-Design Process**

According to Tom’s reflections, the life-design (Savickas et al., 2009) process provided him with a tangible process that he could refer to during future periods of transition (Savickas, 2011). Tom’s final reflection on the life-design process for his career and personal life speaks for itself: “It really helped me to understand myself. Now I can see where I am going. Even the questions you gave me; they made me think so that I can understand my life and my future.”

The life-design process assisted Tom to integrate his knowledge of himself with existing career information (Savickas et al., 2009). In the

card-sorting process, Tom chose private investigator, social worker, religious minister, policeman, advocate, and psychologist as his top preferred occupations. These related to themes from his past and future life narrative about changing the patterns of the past and finding solutions to challenges related to his personal values and his childhood home reality, where the vulnerable family members needed care and protection from his abusive father. Tom expressed repeatedly how the life-design process had helped:

It has helped me to know how to work with people, for example, these young boys in the shelter. It has helped me to realize my dreams and future plans. Like, I know now how I am going to help others [reflection at end of process].

Tom and the counselor collaboratively explored various options for financial support. As evidence of the value of the life-design process, we are happy to say that Tom completed his 1st year of university, but he left as a result of financial difficulties. At the time of this writing, Tom worked as a police reservist focusing on crime prevention among youth. He was seeking full-time employment and intended to continue his tertiary education on a part-time basis.

The present results suggest that the life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009) encouraged Tom to thematically integrate his painful past narratives with his future life plan, and to concretely plan how he will achieve his future dreams. Although a life-design approach has the potential to assist other individuals from vulnerable contexts by following the process summarized in Table 1, clients would need to be at a cognitive and emotional level that allows for deep reflection and integration of themes from their life narratives with career opportunities in their contexts. This may be a limitation of the narrative approach (Maree, 2007) for clients who are not ready for or competent to undertake such a reflective process. Activities like card sorting clearly have to be congruent with the client's knowledge of self and available careers. For Tom, the card-sorting activity seemed appropriate because he had access to community resources like libraries and government institutions where he could find out more about the careers mentioned on the cards. Tom was also able to access funding from a religious institution for his 1st-year tertiary of legal study. Other individuals may not be able to access such funding. The career counselor would be advised to explore what is available in this regard within the client's context.

## Conclusion

The present case study suggests that developments toward narrative career approaches (Maree, 2007) hold promise for individuals from marginalized contexts. The life-design process (Savickas et al., 2009) used herein appeared to assist a former street child in his transition to productive adulthood, using past experiences to understand the present and to inform his construction of a future career identity. Through the various life-design activities, Tom expressed a clearer knowledge of self in terms of personal and systemic values and goals to guide him while working on a future career plan. The outcome of the present study suggests that the life-design process potentially can assist vulnerable individuals,

such as street children, child soldiers, child sex workers, and children of war, who may not previously have been able to explore their personal identities, to integrate their life narratives with related career information. This case study suggests that life-design-based career interventions hold promise for enabling individuals to make sense of the disruptions and deviations within their life narratives (Savickas, 2011) and provide an opportunity for turning painful narratives into stories of hope (Maree, 2013a). Future intervention-based studies with vulnerable individuals, who are at risk of not achieving career adaptability and life satisfaction, could help determine the efficacy of life-design-based processes.

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