



# Constructionist career counseling of undergraduate students: An experimental evaluation



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## ABSTRACT

This study used a pretest–posttest control group design to examine the effectiveness of a six-session constructionist career counseling intervention (Savickas, 2011). It was hypothesized that relative to pre-intervention scores, the participants would demonstrate decreases in their indecision, anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity about their career choices. Participants consisted of 50 undergraduates ranging in age from 19 to 25. They completed the Undergraduate Career Choice Survey (UCCS) and then were evenly divided into an intervention group and a control group. The intervention group received six sessions of constructionist career counseling. Each session was approximately 45 min with a total of 4 h, 30 min approximately for the six sessions. Both groups then took the UCCS again. Analyses of the data using t-tests revealed significant reductions in indecision, anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity for the intervention group but not for the control group. The intervention group took the UCCS again eight weeks later. An ANOVA indicated that the reductions in indecision, anxiety, uncertainty, and insecurity were slightly yet significantly greater. Limitations and directions for further research were pointed out.

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## 1. Introduction

Designed to meet the needs of clients in information societies, constructionist career counseling in the 21st century concentrates on helping individuals develop their own stories and design their lives. Many undergraduate students express career choice indecision as a result of the unprecedented changes in the world-of-work caused by the digital revolution and the globalization of the economy. At the turn of the third millennium, employment has become increasingly fluid as occupational boundaries change or dissolve and more jobs became temporary and contingent (Coetzee, 2007; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). High unemployment rates have become a feature of the global market place (International Association of Education and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG), 2010). Nigeria responded swiftly to the global phenomenon. The unemployment rate in Nigeria rose astronomically. In 1970, it was 4.3%; 1980 at 6.4%; 1992 at 40%; and 2011 at 14.1% (Saluadeen, 2011). Graduate unemployment in Nigeria reached 34.2% (Soludo, 2011). Many undergraduate students are experiencing career indecision because work is increasingly characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty and conflict. They seem to fear being trapped between the traditional and modern career outlooks. In Nigeria, where this study took place, more than 60% are unemployed (Mkpa, 2014), heightening student uncertainty about gainful employment after graduation.

As careers are becoming increasingly fluid, vocational guidance services, which mainly focused on matching people to occupations, must be supplemented by counseling interventions (Askitopoulou & Kantoglou, 2011). To help individuals navigate in liquid societies, a constructionist career counseling approach has been advocated (Maxwell, 2011; Obi, 2014). According to Savickas (2013), rather than make plans, individuals must prepare themselves for future possibilities. Individuals must construct a subjective career with which to impose meaning and direction on their vocational behavior. Continuing, Savickas (2013) stated that a subjective career

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emerges from a mental activity that constructs a story about one's working life. It is this career story that steers and carries individuals across job changes and occupational transitions. Thus, career constructionist theory concentrates on composing and using a career narrative about the self as actor, agent and author. Career construction theory asserts that individuals, through their actions in the family, compose a social role as an actor, then adopt this role for use in the theaters of the school and community, and eventually author an autobiographical story that explains the continuity and coherence in occupational experience (Savickas, 2013). In the global economy of the 21st century, Savickas (2006, 2008) views self-construction as the way forward for career counseling. The shift to self-construction and life designing is illustrative of the growing influence of constructionist epistemology in the theory and practice of career counseling (Savickas et al., 2009).

The underlying assumption of the 21st century career construction model is that people need not be isolated from their environments. From this perspective, career counseling is a reflective process of assisting clients in creating self, through writing and revising biographical narratives taking place in a context of multiple choices from a diversity of options and constraints. The shift moves from emphasizing career choice to empowering self-affirmation and intentionality. If individuals actively participate in the creation of their own reality, then it follows that individuals create their own personal stories in relation to their experiences. The personal story is uncovered and a new reality is constructed through dialog between the client and the counselor. This process is referred to as co-construction (Askitopoulou & Kantoglou, 2011).

The crucial element of the 21st century world-of-work is the importance of empowering clients to design lives that they experience as satisfactory and that they can redesign as needs, interests, and circumstances change. Thus clients should, after career counseling, be better equipped to control the complexities of negotiating career pathways and more motivated to realize specific goals that could stand them in a good stead in their careers and life. In counseling for career construction, the essential activity entails articulating the preoccupation and discussing possible solutions in the form of jobs that may extend the occupational plot into the next scene. Counselors help clients create interests by showing them how a few occupations and avocations directly address their preoccupation and in so doing, may resolve their problems (Savickas, 2005, 2012). Clients and counselors together craft an action agenda that will move a client from the currently experienced situation to the one currently desired. In short, counseling for career construction involves having clients construct their careers by articulating vocational stories, deconstructing demoralizing stories by destabilizing their meanings, reconstructing a life portrait by elaborating the identity narrative, and co-constructing the next episode in the occupational plot by transforming the tension into intention, and taking actions to create a more satisfying life. Thus, the sequence is articulate, destabilize, elaborate, transform, and act (Savickas, 2012). The counselor assists the client to view their indecision as strength not a weakness.

To guide this study, it was hypothesized that relative to pre-intervention scores, the participants will demonstrate improvements in their career choice decisions; experience less anxiety over future career instability; increase certainty about future employment; and perceive more future financial security at both post-intervention and follow-up periods.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The participants for this study were 50 undergraduates ranging in age from 19 to 25 years (males 30, mean of age 20.5, SD 1.74; females 20, mean age 20.1, SD 1.62) from a University in South-East Nigeria. They all were in their third year of college and came from the Igbo ethnic group. They completed the consent form and agreed to participate in the counseling program.

### 2.2. Measure

The participants completed the Undergraduate Career Choice Survey (UCCS). The UCCS has five sections. Section A comprised demographic variables of age, gender, ethnic group, level and course of study. Section B, Indecision, contained four items concerning career choice indecision. Section C, Anxiety, had four items on anxiety over future career stability. Section D, Uncertainty, contained four items expressing uncertainty about being gainfully employed on graduation. Section E, Insecurity, contained four items about perceptions of future financial insecurity. The response scale consisted of four points: strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3) and strongly disagree (4). Thus, higher scores mean less of the variable. Psychometric characteristics of the UCCS were examined a month before the present study using students at a different university. The internal consistency of the total scale was .85 and stability was .82 from test–retest at a two-week interval. The Indecision subscale had a mean of 3.03 with coefficient alpha of 0.89; the Anxiety subscale had a mean of 2.85 with coefficient alpha of 0.79; the Uncertainty subscale had a mean of 3.15 and coefficient alpha of 0.92; and the Insecurity subscale had a mean of 2.85 and coefficient alpha of 0.84. The four subscales of the UCCS correlated positively and significantly with each other. The subscales correlated as expected with the Career Decision Difficulties Questionnaire (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996).

### 2.3. Procedures

The intervention group (IG) consisted of 25 undergraduate students whereas the control group consisted of 25 undergraduate students kept in a Wait List (WL) group. They were randomly assigned to the intervention or the control group after having taken the UCCS. Those participants in the intervention group experienced six sessions of individual constructionist career counseling (Savickas, 2011). Each session generally lasted between 30 to 45 min with a total of approximately 4 h and 30 min for the six sessions.

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