

Post-modern career assessment for traditionally disadvantaged South African learners: Moving away from the 'expert opinion'

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Abstract

This article explores the perceptions of learners from a disadvantaged community regarding the limitations and advantages of traditional and post-modern career assessment techniques in the South African context, when conducted in a group context. Through the use of traditional psychometric instruments, South African professionals are inclined to provide learners from disadvantaged communities with 'expert opinions' regarding their career paths. Evidence suggests that this approach could potentially restrict learners' employment choices. (Maree & Ebersohn, 2002). The article makes a case for the use of a post-modern method of career assessment that could potentially enable and empower learners to make more independent career choices. The approach involves active participation by learners and a more intense journey of self-discovery that could potentially enable better career decision making. Quantitative data were collected through a traditional psychometric career assessment and post-modern narrative career assessment in the case of eleven traditionally disadvantaged learners, after which learners were interviewed in a focus group interview. These qualitative data were then analysed via the use of thematic content analysis to discover themes relating

to the learners' perceptions of the two forms of assessment. The results of the research suggested that learners from disadvantaged communities prefer the structure and standardised conditions in which traditional psychometric career assessment takes place, instead of the unstructured and informal nature of a post-modern narrative career assessment. However, the learners also found value in the narrative assessment. This article explores the implications of these findings in the context of the disempowering environment in which learners from disadvantaged communities find themselves. The article also explores the potential use of culturally appropriate post-modern narrative career assessment in assisting and empowering learners in disadvantaged communities towards independent career-decision making.

Keywords: Career; assessment; disadvantaged; narrative; psychometric

Introduction

Research suggests that through the use of psychometric testing, South African career assessment practitioners tend to adopt an 'expert' position in providing career advice to school learners. (Watson & Stead, 2002; Maree & Beck, 2004). Maree and Ebersohn (2002), point out that the learner generally has little actual input into the psychometric testing procedure and the final decision-making process. As a result this approach is believed to marginalise the learner, who no longer makes his or her own decision about a future career. This appears to be because the learner is overly reliant on the outcomes of the psychometric test. This reliance and dependence on psychometric assessment results could be potentially disempowering, as it does not really allow for self-awareness and personal exploration by the learner of career goals.

The psychometric results obtained through traditional career assessment can have a significant impact in limiting the learners' career and employment choices, and therefore there is a need for learners' to be more actively involved in the process of career education (Maree & Beck, 2004). Furthermore the methods and tests traditionally used in career counselling and assessment have been considered problematic because few psychometric tests have been specifically designed for a multicultural South African population (De Klerk, 1998, in Maree, Bester, Lubbe & Beck, 2001). In addition Western-oriented psychometric tests are not seen to validly or reliably represent South Africa's cultural diversity. These tests also tend to rely on the traditional counsellor-centred approach. Stead (1996) argues that environmental factors play an important role in the career development of South Africans. The significant changes in the political, social and economic environments of South Africa over the past ten years have given adolescents living in the current socio-political environment the opportunity to play a more interactive and empowering role in shaping their careers than previously. However, this role is not fully realised through the means of traditional psychometric career approaches.

The purpose of this study was to examine the implications and applicability of traditional psychometric and narrative post-modern career assessment of learners from disadvantaged communities in the South African context through the analysis of learner' perceptions of these two approaches.

Literature review

Psychometric and narrative career assessment

Psychological assessment can be seen as a process-oriented activity (Lamprecht & Lamprecht, 2002) in which the assessor or counsellor makes use of assessment measures or tests, as well as information from other sources such as interviews, personal history, and collateral sources. This information is then integrated and used to make a career decision. Psychological assessment techniques and tests are also used to help the career counsellor identify the client's specific

vocational interests, personality traits and abilities and thereby recommend certain occupations. The psychometric component of career counselling is mainly a quantitative method of testing and assessment, which has formed the core of the career counselling process. Traditionally this has been the method of choice for many career assessors and counsellors (Watson & Stead, 2002). On the other hand, narrative career assessment has found its place in the context of career counselling as a qualitative counselling approach, and not a career development theory. Larry Cochran (1997) explains this approach as one in which the counsellor makes his or her career interventions with clients more personal and subjective. Because the client is the main protagonist in the career narrative, the process is deemed to be more meaningful.

Traditionally disadvantaged learners

The current research focuses on 'traditionally disadvantaged learners', which refer to learners from previously disadvantaged Black, Coloured and Indian communities. Bernhardt cited in Maite (2005) defines disadvantaged communities as

rural and township communities that are characterised by low income families, mostly with unemployed parents, inadequate educational resources, lack of career centres and lack of career counselling in the majority of the schools (7).

Traditional career assessment in South Africa

South Africa's current employment situation focuses on redressing the inequalities of the past, and on providing people from disadvantaged backgrounds with educational and occupational opportunities. To minimise equality in career assessment, the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, Section 8 (Government Gazette, 1998 cited in Huysamen, 2002) states that

psychological testing and assessment should not to be used unless the test or assessment being used – (a) has been scientifically shown to be valid and reliable, (b) can be applied fairly to all employees; and (c) is not biased against any employee or group (26).

As a result South African career psychology, has found itself in a challenging position with regard to using psychometric testing as a means to "fit" a person to a job.

Lamprecht (2002), in Maree and Beck (2004), criticises the use of psychometric tests in a South African context because very few of these tests have been designed for South Africa's multicultural population. Predominately American and European, these tests are not necessarily valid and reliable in the South African context. De Bruin as cited in Foxcroft and Roodt (2001) explain that due to language, socio-economic, educational and religious backgrounds, measures of validity and reliability do not always tap into equivalent characteristics for different groups.

Until recently, tests and current career counselling models have only been available to white Afrikaans and English-speaking learners and may not be suitable for all cultures, genders and socio-economic groups (Lamprecht, 2002 in Maree & Beck, 2004). Furthermore many of the career assessment methods used have not changed significantly over the past ten years. In the light of this, Foxcroft (2004) and Van der Vijver (2004) contend that there is a need to research and develop more culturally appropriate methods that deal with the changing and complex socio-economic environment.

Furthermore, learners' from previously disadvantaged backgrounds have been faced with various other forms of discrimination in psychological assessment among which Van de Vijver and Rothmann (2004) include the following:

- Unfamiliarity with the material used
- Unfamiliarity with test constructs
- Inadequate cultural representation in the samples used to derive the norm tables.

This discrimination has clearly deprived South Africa's previously disadvantaged as far as

validity and reliability of their assessment results are concerned. In addition, recent research by Foxcroft, Paterson, Le Roux and Herbst (2004) indicates that the most common languages used by practitioners to administer and report on psychometric test findings is English and Afrikaans. Only a small percentage of African languages are used. This raises questions with regard to fair testing practices in a country like South Africa, where most people are not as proficient in English or Afrikaans as they are in an African language. Furthermore Foxcroft (2004) criticises a lack of development (nearly ten years after the demise of Apartheid in South Africa) of culturally relevant tests that can be applied to the diverse range of language and cultural groups. Watson and Stead (2002) state that no career theory has been developed in South Africa that focuses primarily on the career development of South Africa's diverse population groups. Consequently, career theory in South Africa has been, and still is largely dependent on international, particularly Western, career theories. In addition Lamprecht and Lamprecht (2002) argue that the relationship between the counsellor as expert and the client as a passive recipient is one-sided and does not empower the client to make further career decisions later on in life.

The use of a post-modern narrative qualitative approach to career assessment in South Africa

Qualitative career assessment, of which the narrative approach is part, moves away from using psychometric test information. Lamprecht in Maree and Ebersohn (2002, 124) states that qualitative assessment "relies on continuous assessment by means of creative, non-testing techniques, with the aim of gaining in-depth insight into the unique personal profiles of clients". According to Doan in Maree and Ebersohn (2002), the client becomes the expert, which allows for personal ownership of decisions. Maree and Beck (2004) feel that within the South African context, narrative career assessment appears to be an effective movement away from the traditional psychometric testing approach, which does not seem to address the complexity of career behaviour.

The narrative approach used in the career assessment context can help individuals to develop their career choices based on their life stories. In addition Eloff (cited in Maree & Ebersohn, 2002) feels that the narrative assessment allows personal stories to be transferred to career paths and allows clients to influence their career narratives rather than be dependent on the career counsellor's influence.

In South Africa, due to a changing work environment, high levels of unemployment and cultural factors, there would seem to be a need to acknowledge the contextual and social influences upon an individual's career choices and concerns. These influences may place constraints on the choices disadvantaged individuals have, and also on their narratives. Campbell and Ungar (2004) note that in a country like South Africa, there will be many stories that involve racial and social prejudice, poverty and injustice and a lack of confidence that can influence the narrative that is being told.

The study

This study aimed to answer the following primary question:

- How do learners from disadvantaged communities perceive traditional and post-modern career assessment techniques when the assessment takes place in a group setting?

To answer this central question, the following secondary questions are considered:

- What limitations and strengths do learners from disadvantaged communities perceive in the traditional psychometric group career assessment approach?
- What limitations and strengths do learners from disadvantaged communities perceive

in the post-modern group career assessment approach?

Research methods

Sampling

A sample of 11 traditionally disadvantaged learners was chosen through non-probability purposive sampling from all Grade 11 learners at the relevant school in the first school term of January 2006. The method involves participant selection based on defined characteristics central to the population according to which the researcher wishes to generalise the findings (May, 2001). The process also includes stratification, where the participants are required to meet specific characteristics outlined in order that the sample would reflect an accurate proportion of individuals required for the research (Henry as cited in Bickman & Rog, 2000).

Procedures

The subjects were exposed to a traditional group psychometric career assessment on a single school day during the second school term of 2006. These assessments were scored and results interpreted in order to develop career recommendations. The quantitative psychometric career assessment comprised a battery of frequently used and established tests used to gauge the learners' aptitude, personality, interests and values (see Table 1).

One month later the subjects were exposed to a qualitative narrative assessment, utilising methods suggested by Cochran (1997), Goldman (1992) and Maree and Beck (2004), also on a single school day (see Table 1). These data were interpreted to uncover career recommendations. The post-modern career assessment comprised methods and techniques developed to gauge the learners' aptitude, personality, interests and values using narrative career assessment techniques (Cochran, 1997; Maree & Beck; 2004, Maree, 2005). The learners and their parents then received two written reports and verbal feedback on the recommendations uncovered by both the the traditional and the post-modern assessments.

The results (recommendations) from the two sets of assessments were not compared in **Table 1: Psychometric and narrative career assessment instruments used**

Career assessment traits measured	Psychometric career assessment instruments	Narrative career assessment instruments
Aptitude	Differential Aptitude Test (DAT) (Coetzee & Vosloo, 2000)	Informal questionnaire completed by learners and parents; Recent School Report.
Personality	High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ) (Visser, Garbers-Prinsloo & Strauss, 1995, 2000)	Collage; Autobiography with life chapters; Lifeline
Interest	South African Vocational Interest Inventory (SAVII) (Du Toit, Prinsloo, Gevers & Harilall, 1993)	Vocational Card Sort (VCS); Career Interest Profile (CiP) (Maree, 2005); Informal questionnaire completed by learners and parents.
Values	Values Scale (VS) (Langley, Du Toit & Herbst, 1992)	Informal questionnaire completed by learners and parents; List of successful experiences.

any way. Instead, a focus group interview was conducted with the learners in which semistructured questions were asked to gauge their perceptions of the two separate assessment procedures. The data on their perceptions were gathered with the use of a tape recorder and this information was analysed through the use of thematic content analysis to identify themes emerging from the focus group interview.

A qualitative process of thematic content analysis was used to answer the research questions. Content analysis is a form of empirical qualitative research where the researcher plays an important role in making sense of the information that was gained (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). According to Eagle (1998)

Thematic Content Analysis is the term used to describe a more clearly interpretive application of the method in which the focus of analysis is upon thematic content which is identified, categorized and elaborated upon on the basis of systematic scrutiny (195).

Thematic content analysis was therefore used to identify the 'themes' emerging from the focus group interview. Standard ethical procedures were followed throughout the research activities.

Findings

The thematic content analysis revealed that the learners who participated in the study enjoyed the structured format of the psychometric assessment and that they found the process of reading the questions and getting answers simpler than the narrative assessment process. They felt that the psychometric assessment allowed them to 'prove' themselves and that it was an accurate indicator of their performance. They also enjoyed the questions. However the learners criticised the content of some of the test items, saying that a lot of words were difficult to understand. They also felt that they needed more time to complete the questions. In addition the learners indicated that they struggled with certain areas including maths and the technical and memory components of the psychometric assessment. These issues relate largely to the DAT. This instrument which measures aptitude is based on the Trait-and-Factor approach and assumes reliability and validity for the learner population group taking the test. However, as already noted, De Bruin in Foxcroft (2004) argues that due to language, socio-economic, educational and belief backgrounds, these measures do not always tap into the same characteristics for different groups. This could explain the learners' difficulty with certain components of the test.

In the light of the above, it appears that the learners experienced mixed reactions to the formal structure and properties of the traditional psychometric career in terms of their comfort and understanding of the testing process and instruments. They seemed to feel comfortable with the standardised exam-like environment of the assessment, which is similar to their school experiences. They also seemed to prefer the assessor to take on an 'expert' position, in which he or she takes responsibility for the career decision-making of the learner's by providing them with definite career guidelines based on specific assessment results. The learners responded by saying that the psychometric assessment was more 'academic' and more 'structured' than the narrative assessment. They felt that it identified weaknesses and strengths that would help to develop academically. Furthermore they felt that the psychometric assessment helped them to focus their attention on the subject matter and to concentrate, whereas they experienced the fact they could 'say anything' in the narrative assessment as a disadvantage.

When asked which form of assessment they preferred and why, the learners stated that they 'really enjoyed' the narrative assessment as it was 'more creative and easier'. They also stated that the narrative assessment was 'more about yourself', and it helped them realise who they were, 'because some of us don't really know ourselves right now'. It was 'about the individual', and they could 'write anything'. However, when compared with the psychometric assessment, it was clear that the learners found the narrative assessment to be unstructured, less academic

and less able to help them concentrate. They also seemed to struggle to understand the strengths and weaknesses revealed by the narrative assessment. A further disadvantage revealed by the group narrative career assessment was the difficulty of separating personal counselling from career counselling in a narrative career counselling context. In response to certain questions, the learners responded that the narrative assessment 'brought up emotional issues from the past' and 'brought back buried memories from the past'. This bears out the criticism of narrative career assessment made by Maree and Beck (2004). Learners revealed personal and sensitive information throughout the exercises, which could not be realistically addressed in the brief hour-long feedback session.

Further findings indicate that the learners criticised some of the language and content in the test items. Supporting evidence suggests that the assessments used were largely inappropriate in terms of the theory and language used and the requirements of learners in disadvantaged communities particularly in terms of cross-cultural assessment (Foxcroft *et al.*, 2004, Watson & Stead, 2002).

De Bruin (as cited in Stead & Watson, 1999) emphasise that the environment in which certain South African learner's find themselves are consequences of the apartheid era, which has led to the creation of significant career and environmental barriers. Environmental barriers include a lack of prior opportunities and freedom in pursuing occupations of choice, social contextual variables such as race and gender and a lack of finance. These are all factors that could impact on the independent career-decision making of learners from disadvantaged communities. Furthermore career barriers can also be attributed to a lack of parental involvement, limited exposure to role models, lack of opportunity and the poor socio-economic circumstances in which learner's find themselves (Maite, 2005). Indications are that the learners' in the current research experienced these career barriers, particularly in terms of demotivation, as some of the learners' performed very well in the psychometric assessment but were failing in their schoolwork. This showed not only a lack of motivation, but perhaps also a lack of parental support in their current environment. Research by Maite (2005) indicates that the career development of learner's in disadvantaged communities is strongly influenced by destructive parental involvement and low parental income. Negative parental reactions to career choices and a lack of encouragement can also lead to learner demotivation and create further potential career barriers (Maite, 2005).

According to Super's Life-Span theory, the learners in the research study were at the 'exploration' stage of their career development, where they would normally learn to process information and "develop ways to control their own behaviour by listening to themselves and others" (Sharf, 2006, 146). Sharf (2006) explains how, as children grow and successfully complete activities and tasks, they develop a sense of autonomy and a feeling of being in control of future events. This feeling can assist learners to become more aware of their likes and dislikes which, in turn, could have an influence on their career decisions. The learners in the research may have preferred the assessor to 'take control' of their career decision-making and thus the structured environment. This structure may also counter the anxiety of being 'out of control', due to the difficult socio-economic environment in which they find themselves. However, there has not been much research on the link between self-control and the eventual impact on career planning, particularly in the South African context. Nonetheless Sharf (2006, 151) believes that learners can be assisted in their career decision-making process by "helping them to develop a balance between self-control and external control".

When asked how they felt about carrying out the narrative assessment in a group and whether they might have preferred to do it in a one-on-one situation, the learners said that it was 'easier to work in a group and we could work and interact through problem-solving in a group'. The informal nature of the narrative career assessment gave the learners the opportunity to discuss issues with one another and reflect on the instructions and activities. In the research under discussion, the learners found some of the instructions easy to understand and some

not. Maree, Ebersohn and Molepo (2006) explain how many learners in South Africa are used to being taught or spoken to in groups and they are therefore not used to one-on-one types of interactions. Accordingly, it would be useful to start from a group context and then proceed to a one-on-one type dialogue with the learner to "encourage clients to take counsellors into their confidence and become able to share their life experiences" (Maree *et al.*, 2006, 55) However, a limitation in the research was that there were no face-to-face type dialogues except for the feedback session. Even in this instance, the parents were present and the learners may not have felt comfortable sharing their life experiences in this context.

Discussion

Evidence from the current research suggests that learners from disadvantaged communities may prefer the structure and standardised conditions in which traditional psychometric career assessments take place over the unstructured and informal nature of post-modern narrative career assessments. In explaining this finding one needs to consider the environment and context in which psychometric career assessment takes place. In this particular context, according to Maree and Ebersohn (2002), learners are marginalised as they do not have to make their own decisions about a future career. The assessor as 'expert' makes this decision for them and ultimately the learner relies on this decision and the psychometric test outcomes.

The learners may therefore have felt comfortable in the psychometric testing situation because all decision-making was taken out of their hands and they were not really held accountable for the results of the assessment and potential career outcomes. However, this essentially disempowers learners from making important career decisions and accepting responsibility and ownership for the results of the assessment (Maree & Ebersohn, 2002). According to Watson and Stead (2002, 30) "the present definition of our expert role is largely a legacy of the prescriptive definitions of career counselling and education we have inherited from apartheid education". This 'expert role' can therefore have a significant impact in limiting the career and employment choices of learners, especially those from disadvantaged communities.

Furthermore, indications from comments made in the focus group interview suggest that learners in disadvantaged communities face many career barriers in reaching career goals, which could impact on their ability or willingness to make independent career decisions. Fouad, Stead and Els (2004) define career barriers as negative contextual influences which can diminish a learners' self-efficacy (the belief and confidence individuals have in their ability to perform successfully in given tasks or behaviours) and subsequently have an impact on their career choices, goals and actions.

The researcher explored post-modern narrative career assessment as a more appropriate alternative to redress the disempowering and 'expert position' taken by the assessor in career assessment and as a way to deal more effectively with potential career barriers experienced by learners from disadvantaged communities. Maree and Beck (2004) explain how a post-modern narrative perspective focuses on a client's subjective career (his/her life story) and assists them in developing and interpreting stories in order to empower their career decisions. Evidence from the current research suggests that a narrative career assessment provides a good opportunity to empower learners to take responsibility and ownership of their career decisions. The learner's responses suggested that in the narrative assessment they enjoyed talking about themselves, their issues and their lifestyle and thus felt empowered by the opportunity provided to tell their stories. It is interesting to note that despite this, they still favoured the psychometric career assessment.

Those trained in narrative career counselling and assessments need to be cognisant of the problems and limitations experienced by disadvantaged learners and deal with them in order to assist clients in overcoming personal issues and career barriers towards effective and

independent occupational decision-making. Counsellors and assessors ideally need to be aware of the implications of working in a diverse context and play a more active role in engaging with learners to assist them in understanding their narratives, life career journeys and to help them make sense of their experiences. Maree, *et al.* (2006, 50) stress the importance of displaying sensitivity "to the dilemmas generally encountered when individuals from educationally, environmentally or culturally marginalised groups participate in assessments". In addition, Pope, Cheng & Leong (1998, 54) argue that "there is a need for the use of culturally sensitive counselling skills, career as well as personal, in the content of the individual's social/cultural influence and personal reaction to these influences." Pope *et al.* (1998) also emphasise the triadic relationship between the social context (the culture), the personal context (interpersonal relationships) and the context in which career decision-making takes place. The narrative can provide a useful environment in which to locate and deal with some of the internal and external barriers experienced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of career decision-making.

Narrative career assessment has not been used in a group setting before and the research revealed certain advantages and disadvantages to this approach, particularly in terms of its use in disadvantaged communities. Evidence suggests the feasibility of starting the assessment in a group setting and then proceeding to a more face-to-face type interaction and dialogue with the learners (Maree *et al.*, 2006). Nonetheless, the current research has indicated that the assessor(s) needs to be more involved with learners on an individual basis during a narrative assessment, than what actually took place.

Conclusion

In conclusion the article has argued that although learner's from disadvantaged communities prefer the structure and format of psychometric career assessment, South African practitioners need to move away from providing an 'expert opinion' in this regard as it could potentially constrict and limit learner employment choices. The researcher believes that narrative group career assessment can be highly effective in empowering learners from disadvantaged communities towards independent career decision-making, and assist learner's to deal with potential career barriers. Nonetheless, this may be quite difficult to implement given that learners seem to prefer structure and being told what to do, possibly because they feel disempowered by the situations in which they find themselves. In order to improve the effectiveness of such an assessment the narrative career assessment should be used in conjunction with other psychometric-related instruments to further validate the results.

Furthermore more time should be spent with individual learners' and their parents, so that the narrative process can be fully effective. Of vital importance is that the assessor should be fully trained in the narrative career assessment and counselling process and able to facilitate counselling processes in combination with the narrative career decision-making process, if necessary.

Further research into the applicability of narrative career assessment following the above guidelines will improve the nature of career assessment in South Africa. The researcher suggests that research be conducted on the feasibility of training school teachers in narrative career counselling and assessment procedures and that a programme or workshop based on this training be included in the school curriculum during the Grade Eleven year. At the moment the administration, scoring and feedback of psychometric career assessment in South Africa is restricted to Psychometrists, Independent Psychometrists and Psychologists who are registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). In addition to this, career assessment tends to be quite expensive and out of reach of most learners in disadvantaged communities. Narrative career assessments are largely non-psychometric and, with sufficient

training, can be administered by appropriately qualified school teachers or counsellors to reduce costs. The inclusion of such a training programme for teachers could greatly assist high school learner's to make appropriate and independent career decisions within the school setting.

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