

# EFFICACY OF USING LIFE DESIGN-BASED COUNSELLING FOR AN EMERGING ADULT WHO HAD SUFFERED PARENTAL NEGLECT

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on the value of life design-based counselling for an emerging adult who had experienced parental (emotional) neglect and was now ready to embark on a career. Purposive sampling was used to select an emerging adult who had experienced parental neglect and had entered the workplace stage. Such research in South African education contexts is limited. A QUAL + quan design was used to gather and analyse the data. An intrinsic, descriptive, exploratory intervention case study involving a single individual was the basis of the research. Thematic data analysis (in combination with ATLAS.ti) was conducted to analyse the data, that is, look for themes and subthemes in the data. The intervention enhanced the participant's career resilience and career adaptability. Exploring her life story for themes and patterns helped her gain new insight into the meaning of her experiences. The intervention enabled her to enter a new chapter in her life from a position of strength and an improved sense of self. Longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of life design-based interventions on groups of emerging adults who had experienced different kinds of parental neglect are needed to determine the longer-term value of the kind of intervention described in this article.

**Keywords:** life design-based counselling, career adaptability, career resilience, emergent adult, parental neglect

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.” (Frankl, Lasch, and Allport 1962).

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Optimus Study (CJCP 2016, 38), neglect is “the result of an intentional lack of access to physical and emotional resources”. This means that, despite being able to do so, a parent or caregiver deliberately fails to provide basic care to a child. Children can also be

considered to be in a neglectful situation when there is a lack of regular engagement with them or when the parents fail to provide emotional support – even though they may meet their child’s physical needs.

### **Emerging adulthood**

Arnett (2000, 469) describes emerging adulthood as a “new conception of development for the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18–25 in industrialised societies”. Thus, emerging adulthood is a phase that can be considered neither adolescence nor young adulthood. It is a phase characterised by a search for identification, exploration, and life roles.

Turning 18 also coincides with certain legalities, such as being able to vote and, in South Africa, to have a driver’s licence, consume alcohol, and smoke cigarettes.

### **Parental neglect**

Despite little research on parental neglect, (Stoltenborgh et al. 2014) equate the long-term consequences of such neglect with physical abuse, substance abuse, diminished economic well-being, sexual promiscuity, susceptibility to a post-traumatic stress disorder, a non-standard attachment style, greater likelihood of becoming dependent on social services, and a greater probability of violent behaviour. According to Childline South Africa (2019), neglect ranks third on the list of reported cases for 2018–2019, with a prevalence of 10 per cent. The Optimus Study, however, found that young people prefer not to report instances of abuse – whether sexual, physical, or emotional – or neglect (CJCP 2016). This implies that the prevalence of child neglect or maltreatment is probably much higher than the current statistics show. Emerging adults who have suffered parental neglect are at a higher risk of becoming part of this statistic (Venter and Maree 2020). According to Metzler et al. (2017), children with adverse childhood experiences (both physical and emotional) have a higher probability of not completing high school, not finding employment, and living below the poverty line.

Adolescents need help developing career resilience and skills to enhance their employability. These skills include problem-solving skills, resourcefulness and self-motivation, coping with stress, teamwork, and the ability to learn and adapt (Daskal 2017). De Bruin (2016) contends that the education system has largely failed in ensuring people’s employability. However, at the same time, people also have an important role in determining their employability. Many of the interpersonal skills mentioned above are undermined through parental neglect. A style of career counselling is therefore needed in the school environment that will help emerging adults deal with their psychological pain, develop career resilience and

career adaptability, and construct a successful and meaningful future for themselves.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

Maree (2013) believes that 20th-century approaches to career counselling no longer meet the needs of 21st-century people. Maree exhorts career counsellors to draw on life design-based intervention for career construction to help people create a new way of life filled with purpose and meaning that can help them build resilience, become gainfully employed, and achieve adaptability in the changing world of work. Arnett (2000, 473) states that emerging adulthood is a specific period of life that “offers the most opportunity for identity explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews”.

### **Life design**

According to Maree (2013), traditional approaches to career counselling are based on assumptions that are no longer applicable today, such as the notion of secure jobs where people start in an organisation and stay in it until retirement (Savickas et al. 2009). This is not the case in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where the world of work is largely unpredictable.

A complicating factor is the dynamic nature of people’s personalities and the environmental influences exerted on them. Conventional psychometric testing focuses on measurable skills such as literacy, numeracy, problem-solving ability, personality traits, and aptitude (Maree 2013). Although tests are a valuable part of career counselling, they do not promote the eliciting, constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing of people’s different life stories. Emerging adults who have suffered parental neglect and are ready to enter the workforce need more than objective test scores to guide them. They also need to learn how to deal with their pain (parental neglect) and live meaningful and hope-filled lives where they are contributing members of society and self-regulating individuals. Emerging adults may have trouble choosing an appropriate career journey as they have been left without a proper support system for most of their lives. They generally have low self-esteem, attachment issues, and problems starting and maintaining healthy relationships through their lack of trust in others (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013).

Emerging adults who suffered neglect as children should benefit from career counselling that includes life design because of its reflectiveness and focus on finding meaning for oneself. Savickas et al. (2009) regard life design as a collaborative process in which the client and the practitioner consider experiences in the client’s life, including environmental influences (Ungar 2011). Part of this process entails revisiting experiences and feelings of the past to make sense of what they may mean for a person’s future (Maree 2016a). The narrative becomes a powerful

method for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing a person's life story.

Life design is a flexible and dynamic process that allows the practitioner to work with clients to make sense of the past and find hope for the future. Gaining employability skills instead of merely being employed (Sarfraz et al. 2018) lies at the heart of life design-based counselling.

### **Career adaptability**

Career adaptability can “help individuals articulate and enact a career story that supports adaptive and flexible responses to developmental tasks, vocational traumas, and occupational transitions. It helps them develop their capabilities to anticipate changes and their future in changing contexts” (Savickas et al. 2009, 245).

This definition is still applicable in the 21st century during the rapid changes in the world of work. According to Savickas and Porfeli (2012), career construction theory (one of the cornerstones of life design) sees adaptability as a crucial psychosocial resource for adapting to the changing workplace. They differentiate between adaptive (willing) individuals and those who are adaptable (able) to utilise the skills needed to survive in changing work environments. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) distinguish four dimensions of career adaptability: career concern, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence. Career construction theory (Savickas 2015, 5) holds that adaptations to changing environments depend on five key types of behaviours, namely “orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement”. Savickas (2015) and Perera and McIlveen (2017) maintain that individuals can utilise these adaptive behaviours whenever a change occurs and find confidence in them when they experience transitions.

### **Resilience**

Ungar's (2011) theory of social ecology for resilience emphasises the importance of prior environmental influences in children's ability to overcome adversity. This ecological approach focuses on context and people's traits and is based on the premise that facilitative environments can promote positive growth. The research underpinning social ecology for resilience is based on four principles: i) decentrality, ii) complexity, iii) typicality, and iv) cultural relativity.

- i) Decentrality: Decentring a child involves a shift in focus from the child's internal resources and traits to the availability and ability of the environment to support the child's innate abilities (Ungar 2011). The process of enhancing resilience is thus a combination of nature and nurture working together in harmony.

- ii) Complexity: As children grow up, their personalities are influenced by social interactions, personal experiences, and environmental changes. The complex nature of these interactions makes it difficult to determine cause and effect and resilience outcomes; however, Ungar (2011) believes that the environment has the strongest influence.
- iii) Atypicality: The principle of atypicality opposes the view that resilience is linked to dichotomous choices such as right or wrong (Ungar 2011). Childhood experiences are unique regarding children's traits, context, and environment, implying numerous correct responses to a specific situation.
- iv) Cultural relativity: The above principles also need to be considered alongside cultural relativity. Ungar (2011) believes resilience cannot be studied or understood without considering minority cultures. How people group themselves together influences how they perceive, react and explain resilience. Ungar (2011, 10) further believes that "... positive development is much more likely to result when social and physical conditions surrounding an individual at risk make the resources they need useable".

### **The three layers of personality: The psychological self as actor, agent, and author**

Over time, from birth to emerging adulthood, and to varying degrees, people transition from 1) performing as social actors, 2) demonstrating motivated agency and, eventually, 3) integrating their career-life stories as autobiographical authors (Maree 2020). According to McAdams and Olson (2010), the first layer of personality (vocational personality) relates to Holland's theory of vocational type (Holland 1997) and theories of person-environment fit (Parsons 2005). During this phase, which involves personality or dispositional traits, "early temperament differences morph into the broad traits of personality that may be observed in adulthood" (McAdams and Olson 2010, 174). The second layer of personality involves characteristic adaptations and/or dispositions "to act in accord with self-determined plans, rooted in decisions, choice, and goals" (McAdams 2010 and Olson, 177). Some authors regard traits as recurrent styles of self-regulation.

McAdams (2013) argues that disposition includes strivings or motives, interests (as a trait), goals and plans, values, and other personality concepts that speak mainly to motivational aspects of people's personality configuration. During the second phase, people typically seek clarity regarding what they want in life, how they can achieve their goals and actualise their future plans, and how they can deal with life's numerous challenges. During the third phase, the third layer of personality involves establishing and clarifying narrative identity ("an internalized and evolving story of the reconstructed past and imagined future that aims to

provide life with unity, coherence, and purpose”) (McAdams 2010 and Olson, 171).

### **Rationale for the study**

Research reveals that many people take their pain and turn it into a purpose that gives them a happier and more meaningful life (Maree 2020). This ability depends largely on the severity of the pain or trauma and the person’s resilience. Those without high resilience will benefit from a life design-based intervention that focuses on people’s individual stories and considers their personal views of reality as embedded in their particular contexts. Research on abuse is dominated by studies on physical and sexual abuse (Stoltenborgh et al. 2014). However, most children and adolescents are not abused physically or sexually – rather, they experience emotional neglect, with its adverse long-term effects. In this study, we examined how the effects of parental neglect could be countered and how career adaptability and resilience could be enhanced through an intervention based on life design-based principles (Pouyaud et al. 2018).

### **Research questions**

This case study set out to investigate the influence that an intervention based on life design principles had on an emerging adult who had experienced parental neglect and was at the stage of entering the workplace. The study addressed the primary research question: What influence did an intervention based on life design principles have on an emerging adult who had experienced parental neglect and had reached the stage of embarking on a career? The following secondary questions arose from the primary question.

### ***Exploratory questions***

- i. How did an emerging adult who had experienced parental neglect experience life design-based counselling?
- ii. How did life design-based counselling influence the career adaptability of the participant?
- iii. How did life design-based counselling influence the resilience of the participant?

## **METHOD**

### **Participant and context**

Purposive sampling was used to select Aurora (pseudonym), a white, English-speaking emerging adult. She sought guidance on her future options and intervention that could help her make sense of her traumatic childhood experiences, which had led to feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, guilt, mistrust, and mental health problems. Aurora lived at a children’s home

in Kempton Park, Gauteng, and turned 18 during the research intervention.

## **Mode of inquiry and design**

A QUALITATIVE+quantitative (QUAL+quan; uppercase signifying the priority given to the qualitative approach) mixed-methods approach was implemented. Qualitative and quantitative data generation and analysis occurred concurrently.

An intrinsic, descriptive, exploratory case study involving a single individual was chosen as a career intervention based on life design-based principles constructed around the stories of individuals as perceived in their particular contexts.

## **Data construction instruments**

### ***Qualitative data construction***

The following data construction instruments were used.

- i. The *Career Interest Profile (CIP)* (Maree 2013), which is wholly qualitative. According to Maree (2013, 71), “the *CIP* provides career counsellors with a strategy to help clients not only choose ‘appropriate’ careers but, more importantly, advance their unfinished stories, construct life trajectories, construct themselves and use their careers to design and live successful lives”. The *CIP* is user friendly and follows a logical flow from straightforward to more complex questions (Maree 2013).

An advantage of the *CIP* is its inclusiveness, thus enabling career counsellors to assist people from marginalised sectors of society. According to Di Fabio and Maree (2013), a further advantage is that it includes a variety of methods to assess career interest. The *CIP* has four parts. Part 1 includes biographical details, family influences, and work-related information. Part 2 covers career preferences and dislikes. Part 3 comprises questions on career choice. Part 4 is a person’s career story narrative (Di Fabio and Maree 2013). Together these parts help people (a) narrate their (career-)life stories, (b) identify central life themes, and (c) seek advice on how to convert concerns into hopeful themes, thereby promoting their career-life stories (Maree and Che 2018). The *CIP* does not require any specific training and can be used by professionals such as teachers, counsellors, career practitioners, industrial psychologists, and educational psychologists. Other qualitative assessments used during the interviews:

- ii. Collage (Gerstenblatt 2013). Collages help people express their life stories in a creative and relaxing manner. The participant in the study was asked to create a Pinterest board

with images she liked, which she shared with me electronically. As she did not have access to a printer, I printed her collection of pictures.

- iii. Lifeline.
- iv. Portfolio. The participant completed a portfolio, so we combined the collage and the lifeline into a book she compiled during the intervention.
- v. Informal interviews were held to build rapport and put the participant at ease in the career construction process (Maree and Che 2018).
- vi. Journal. The participant kept a reflective journal throughout the intervention.

### **Quantitative data construction**

#### ***Maree Career Matrix (MCM)***

This case study included a small quantitative section to give the participant objective insight into her career interests and personality. The data from the measures used, namely the *CIP* (Maree 2013), the portfolio, and the informal interviews, were triangulated with the data from the quantitative measures to strengthen the study's validity (Yin 2013). The *MCM* (Maree 2016b) assists people's career journey by assessing and charting their career interests and skills confidence. Based on South African norms, the test takes 25–30 minutes to complete. The matrix has four quadrants that reflect people's attraction to 19 job categories by asking them to rate their interest and skill levels in 152 different occupations, which are then plotted on the *MCM*. The quadrants are categorised as 1) go for it; 2) bottom of the pile; 3) use it, don't lose it; and 4) up-skill yourself (Maree and Taylor 2016).

#### ***Jung Personality Questionnaire (JPQ)***

The *JPQ* (Du Toit 1983) is a questionnaire that measures people's thinking styles and how they deal with information. We did not intend to use the *JPQ* at the outset of the intervention. However, during the interview sessions, the participant expressed a need to understand her personality better as she felt she needed help with interpersonal relationships. Because of the study's dynamic nature, the *JPQ* was used for this purpose only and not as an assessment tool to help with vocational guidance.

### **Rigour of the study**

The participant (Aurora) was assessed in her mother tongue. She repeatedly reflected on and confirmed whether she agreed with the interpretations of her responses to questions. All her observations were noted carefully and subsequently (meta-) reflected on systematically and

analytically. All the findings were documented in detail. Triangulation was enhanced using qualitative as well as quantitative assessment techniques and strategies. Asking multiple qualitative questions promoted crystallisation (Janesick 2000). A concerted effort was made to gather sufficient information to facilitate and enable replication of the case study in diverse settings.

## **Data analysis and interpretation**

### ***Qualitative data analysis***

The constructed data related to the narrative analysis of the participant's life story. The data analysis was based on an inductive process that enabled the researchers to identify themes from the data without preconceived ideas of possible themes. The narrative analysis further enabled the researchers to identify patterns and themes in the transcribed content through thematic data analysis (Clarke and Braun 2016). The primary researcher (and first author of this article) also used ATLAS.ti 9 (Scales 2013) to facilitate this analysis (Rambaree 2014). (The merged codes served merely as guidelines for extracting the subthemes.)

The content was carefully scrutinised to allocate codes to specific quotations in the transcriptions. The codes were named and allocated based on recurring patterns in the content. The codes were then further investigated and some codes were merged. All the code names in the content became the subthemes of the narrative. They were assigned to the main theme (code group) to align the subthemes with relevant literature. By examining the patterns and frequencies of the data throughout the process, the researchers could make inferences that could serve as explanations for certain phenomena (Le Grange 2022).

### ***Quantitative data analysis***

The research consisted of a small quantitative element in the form of the questionnaires that were used to assess the participant's career options (*MCM*) (Maree 2016b) and personality traits (*JPQ*) (Du Toit 1983). The primary researcher marked and scored the questionnaires according to standard procedures. The outcomes were used to complement the qualitative data in exploring possible career trajectories for the participant. The themes emerging from the quantitative data were compared to and correlated with the themes generated from the qualitative data.

## **Ethical considerations**

Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the participant's life story, precautions were taken

to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the sharing of data with the primary researcher was discussed and agreed upon with the participant before the start of the research. The participant also agreed to the sharing of the case study data. She gave written informed assent to participate in the research in the presence of her social worker, who also gave written permission for her participation in the study. The participant and the social worker were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and the right to withdraw at any time. The University of Pretoria's Institutional Review Board approved the study.

## Intervention

The intervention consisted of seven interview sessions (see Table 1). Challenges that arose due to the predominantly qualitative research approach included time constraints for the primary researcher and the participant. An external coder was involved to enhance interrater validity and to promote intercoding reliability (O'Conner and Joffe 2020). All the sessions were structured to accommodate the participant's idiosyncratic situation and were adapted accordingly when needed. Alternative dates were scheduled for missed sessions.

The participant was not required to travel as the primary researcher arranged all the interviews to take place at the church opposite the children's home where the participant stayed. The church offered a safe, familiar, and private space for the intervention.

**Table 1:** Data sources and three-digit coding system used to reference data

Document ID	Associated session and data source	Data construction technique/ strategy(ies) used during session	Page number	Line number/s
11	Session 1 (linked to rough lifeline) Clarifying the presenting problem and establishing intervention goals	Narrative analysis	1–66	1–623
12	Session 2 Investigating Aurora's current system of subjective identity forms (SIFs) (1)	Narrative analysis and reflection on session 1 (adding more detail to the lifeline) <i>MCM</i>	1–73	1–819
13	Session 3 Investigating Aurora's current system of SIFs (2)	Going through her reflections of the previous session and identifying the negative themes and patterns according to her insight	1–48	1–310
14	Session 4 (linked to poem and painting) Investigating Aurora's current system of SIFs (3)	Discussing the meaning assigned to her poem and her painting	1–57	1–458
15	Session 5 Opening Aurora's perspectives. Re-narrating the stories to reflect a more objective and positive focus	Reflection on the identification of positive themes in her lifeline	1–30	1–222
16	Session 6 (linked to <i>JPQ</i> and discussion of collages for portfolio) Adding a novel perspective to the	Feedback on <i>JPQ</i> and reflection on collages for portfolio, interpersonal	1–49	1–413

Document ID	Associated session and data source	Data construction technique/ strategy(ies) used during session	Page number	Line number/s
	“presenting problem”. Placing the current story in a “new” story	relationships		
I7	Session 7 (linked to CIP) Devising action plans aimed at actualising Aurora’s “true” identity (1)	The final session was based on the online <i>CIP</i> report and overall reflection of the process	1–71	1–541
R1	Devising action plans aimed at actualising Aurora’s “true” identity (2)	Written reflection on the lifeline process	1–4	1–63
R2	Devising action plans aimed at actualising Aurora’s “true” identity (3)	Written reflections of each session	1–5	1–92
R3	Scheduling short-, medium, and long-term follow-up	Written reflection on the whole life design-based intervention process	1–2	1–36

## OUTCOMES (RESULTS)

Table 2 summarises the themes and subthemes that emerged from the inductive, narrative analysis of the data. The merged codes serve merely as guidelines for the essence of the subthemes. This section covers only the themes and subthemes.

**Table 2:** Themes and subthemes

	Themes	Subthemes	Merged codes
1.	<b>Neglect</b> According to Talley (2005), child neglect is “the caregiver’s inability to meet a child’s major needs”. In this study, the terms “parental neglect”, “emotional neglect”, and “neglect” are used interchangeably. All three concepts refer to parents’ omission of care, nurturing, affection, support, and discipline for their emerging adult children up to the age of 21.	Effects of parental neglect  Negative external influences  Traumatic events	Suicide; Anxiety; Fear Anger; Mistrust, and isolation; Rejection; Self-doubt and low self-worth; Blame and guilt; Depression; Powerlessness; Physical health  Normalising negative feelings The mental health of the mother Spirituality of mother Substance abuse of mother  Verbal and physical abuse Police and court Physical fights Physical health of the mother Moving house
2.	<b>Resilience and self-construction</b> Resilience is the ability to adjust well and construct oneself adequately when faced with tragedy, threats, and significant sources of stress. Examples of problems that require resilience are family and relationship problems, serious health problems, and workplace and financial stressors (APA 2011; Maree, 2020)	Agency  Mental/Spiritual resources	A sense of mastery and responsibility for her own life Narrative self-analysis Self-regulation and self-direction Intentionality Enhanced functioning  Hope; Giftedness; Positive external influences; Support; Gratitude; Insight; The positive mental health of self
3.	<b>Occupational personality</b> People’s career abilities, needs, values, and interests are produced through complex interactions among cultural and personal factors (Fidan 2019). Savickas (2019) states that occupational (vocational) personality refers to a person’s career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests.	Future aspirations	Areas of growth ( <i>CIP</i> ) Role models ( <i>CIP</i> ) Career choices ( <i>CIP</i> ) Life themes ( <i>CIP</i> ) Book title and chapters ( <i>CIP</i> ) Careers ( <i>MCM</i> ) Sense of purpose Career Influences Personality profile ( <i>JPQ</i> ) Reflections and insight

	Themes	Subthemes	Merged codes
		Career adaptability	Concern Control Curiosity Confidence Motivation; Self-belief Growth

Aurora's verbatim responses to substantiate the subthemes listed in Table 2 are given below. (The participant's responses are verbatim with only light editing to preserve the authenticity of the answers.)

## **Neglect**

### ***Effects of parental neglect***

Brief description: Immediate physical injuries children experience as a result of maltreatment (abuse or neglect)

"... my mom was on heavy painkillers, heavy doses of opiates, chemo, sleeping pills. She was on some (inaudible) for her nerve pain, and on top of that, she would drink quite heavily. And then she would get drunk or out of it, and then she would come and scream at me about something that I did ..." (I1; 11; 110)

### ***Negative external influences***

Brief description: Observed negative influence of family, friends, institutions, and others' behaviour on mental health

"Then in, during June exams that year, I had my second overdose when my Mom and I were still fighting (inaudible) still freaking me out" (I2; 41; 475).

### ***Traumatic events***

Brief description: Events that posed a threat of serious injury

"And then you must go and they ... slaughter chickens on you, and then they slaughter goats on your back, and you have to drink it. Yeah, and mine was bad. Mine did not want to die, I won't blame it. It kicked me, I had bruises all over my back ... and they didn't cut, and I was the second one to go because I was younger and the knife was blunt, and it struggled, and they didn't cut it properly ..." (I1; 41; 437).

## **Resilience and self-construction**

### ***Agency***

Brief description: Actions and attitudes that intentionally undermine positive behaviour (Chen and Hong 2020).

“Um, because it’s you at the end of the day. You’ve got to support yourself, not just on a financial very basic means and all, but on a higher ... your self-actualisation your emotional support, your sense of your security” (ID3; 15; 102).

### ***Mental/Spiritual resources***

Brief description: Cognitive, behavioural, and emotional regulation in change situations (Waldeck et al. 2021).

“Yeah, like that’s the thing. It’s very balanced, and even in the bad, there were certain good aspects because my Thwasa was a very bad, difficult, and tiring experience, but it taught me a lot. It taught me just work ... because obviously, for me in my life I’ve never really had to be in a situation where it’s just physical workday in and day out, day in and day out. It taught me that if you need to do it, you’ve got to do it and how to do it” (I7; 42; 332).

### **Occupational Personality**

#### ***Future aspirations***

Brief description: Well-defined career goals and dreams about the future

“Yeah, that’s why I chose it because I want to be able to move, do things, and be impulsive safely because I know I have that nature. So, my idea is to create something because if you think about, like, economists are, it’s a skill that is lacking globally, right, in most labour markets ... A, B, it’s international, it’s something that translated internationally” (I2; 61; 709).

#### ***Career adaptability***

Brief description: Coping mechanisms deal with developmental tasks and negotiate change and role transitions (Maree 2013; Maree, Cook, and Fletcher, 2017).

“Yeah, no, I think especially with the lockdown like that’s one thing it has taught me is just adjust. You’ve got to keep moving ...” (I7; 28; 217).

Table 3 summarises the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the themes and subthemes.

**Table 3:** Summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria for themes and subthemes

<b>THEME 1: NEGLECT</b>		
<b>SUBTHEME</b>	<b>INCLUSION</b>	<b>EXCLUSION</b>
Negative external influences	Any person, place, or event that negatively influenced Aurora by evoking negative emotions and/or actions in her.	Any external influences and/or experiences that did not evoke negative emotions or actions from Aurora. In some instances, negative influences, like her mother, had a positive effect on her. Such experiences were not included.

<b>THEME 1: NEGLECT</b>		
<b>SUBTHEME</b>	<b>INCLUSION</b>	<b>EXCLUSION</b>
Effects of parental neglect	These include all mental and/or physical health problems that could have resulted from her experience of parental neglect, as confirmed in the literature on the topic and as a result of her perceptions and feelings.	All mental and/or physical health problems that could not be related to the effects of parental neglect and all experiences not reported by Aurora as being a possible result of parental neglect.
Traumatic events	All the specific, personal experiences of events that could be vividly recalled and linked to negative thoughts and feelings.	All the specific, personal experiences of events not linked to negative thoughts and feelings.
<b>THEME 2: RESILIENCE AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION</b>		
Agency	All statements explicitly made by Aurora that refer to a sense of agency, mastery, and responsibility for her own life. All inferences based on the narrative analysis that refer to her sense of agency and mastery.	All statements and inferences not related to a sense of agency, mastery, or responsibility for her own life.
Mental/Spiritual resources	All statements explicitly made by Aurora that refer to her ability to be flexible and to adapt her behaviour or thoughts to changing circumstances.	All inferences based on the narrative analysis that do not refer to her ability to be flexible and to adapt her behaviour or thoughts to changing circumstances.
<b>THEME 3: OCCUPATIONAL PERSONALITY</b>		
Future aspirations	All statements and inferences about Aurora's envisioned future. This includes all the influences that may have impacted her current career choices and hopes for the future.	All statements and inferences that do not contribute to Aurora's envisioned future.
Career adaptability	All quotations relating to her ability to be adaptable in a changing workplace or institution for further education.	All quotations that do not relate to her ability to be adaptable in a changing workplace or institution for further education.

Table 4 summarises the themes, subthemes, and sub-subthemes identified in this study. Pre-intervention status and information were obtained through data gathered during the first three sessions especially (when baseline information was obtained). Throughout the seven interview sessions, during the administration of the CIP (Maree 2017), and in her written reflections, Aurora repeatedly reflected on her emotions, actions, and lived experiences before the intervention, in addition to how she had experienced and had made progress during the intervention. Thus, information about her was conceptualised through coding to obtain an operational idea of the pre-themes and subthemes, especially those relating to resilience and career adaptability constructs. The information about the pre-themes and subthemes was consequently summarised and juxtaposed with the post-themes and post-subthemes as shown in Table 3.

In summary, in the current study, an emerging adult who had experienced parental neglect found the process of the intervention enriching and valuable. A life story filled with sadness, depression, trauma, and rejection was constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed, and co-constructed into a story of hope and optimism for the future. The research thus confirmed the value of such counselling in helping an emerging adult deal with the traumatisation triggered by adverse events (Prideaux 2021) and restoring her sense of dignity, self-respect, and purpose (Di Fabio and Maree 2013; Maree 2022a; 2022b).

**Table 4:** Summary of pre- and post-intervention themes and subthemes

Pre-Intervention Themes	Post-Intervention Themes
Pre-Intervention Status	Theme
<b>THEME 1: NEGLECT</b>	
Aurora had some sense of belonging at the children's home but still experienced intense feelings of neglect as she constructed her lifeline.	A renewed perspective upon reflecting on her narrative and a sense of acceptance and gratitude for her experiences.
<b>Subtheme: Effects of Parental Neglect</b>	
Poor mental health, emotional isolation from peers, anxiety.	Improved mental health, less anxiety, and opening up to friends.
<b>Subtheme: Negative External Influences</b>	
Her mother and the institutions she was referred to contributed to her poor mental health, including suicide attempts, depression, mistrust, and anxiety.	Aurora's placement at the children's home removed her from these external influences, leading to an improvement in her mental health. The intervention further assisted her in making sense of those influences and gaining insight and personal growth.
<b>Subtheme: Traumatic Events</b>	
Exposure to several traumatic events caused feelings of anxiety, guilt, self-blame, and regret.	Less intense feelings of anxiety and an understanding that she did not have to feel guilty or blame herself for certain events.
<b>THEME 2: RESILIENCE AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION</b>	
An innate resilience despite poor social support until she was placed at the children's home. An intense realisation of all the risk factors in her life even after placement.	A realisation of her innate resilience and what she was able to endure as well as a realisation of her risk factors and protective factors and resources.
<b>Subtheme: Agency</b>	
Aurora seemed to have an innate sense of agency before the intervention; however, it was clouded with her own self-doubt.	A stronger belief in her own agency and confidence in her ability to steer her life in the direction she chose.
<b>Subtheme: Mental/Spiritual resources</b>	
Aurora had always been willing to adapt despite adverse conditions, but the lack of parental support caused emotional strain, making adapting more difficult. She was not always aware of her own strength.	Renewed insight into her ability to adapt and better coping skills, which enhanced her adaptability.
<b>THEME 3: OCCUPATIONAL PERSONALITY</b>	
A confident idea of the career she would like to embark on but low confidence in her ability to pursue her choice.	A confirmation of her career choice and confidence in her ability to pursue her choice. She started applying at universities despite no guarantee of where financial assistance would come from.
<b>Subtheme: Future Aspirations</b>	
Aurora initially considered a gap year in Spain to experience the world and to determine whether her career choice was what she wanted.	She felt confident enough in her career choice to start enrolling in universities and was accepted at the university of her choice.
<b>Subtheme: Career Adaptability</b>	
Aurora exhibited some effects of parental neglect, including low self-esteem, poor interpersonal relationships, rejection sensitivity, and mistrust.	Aurora had more confidence in her interpersonal relationships, which enabled her to trust others. She gained insight, which led to higher emotional intelligence. She finished Grade 12 with good grades, despite missing ten months of school. The above factors all contributed positively to her career adaptability.

## DISCUSSION

The study goal was to examine how the effects of parental neglect could be countered and how career adaptability and resilience could be enhanced through an intervention based on life design principles. In the following section, the research questions are “answered” concerning the study findings. Additionally, we focus on objectively assessing, critiquing, and relating the

study's outcomes to outcomes in the literature. However, despite our best attempts, we struggled to find a sufficient number of studies relating to the idiosyncratic situation in which the participant in the study found herself.

The study had three secondary (explanatory) research questions, which will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the primary research question.

## **Secondary research questions**

*How did an emerging adult who had experienced parental neglect experience life design-based counselling facilitated through the intervention used in the current study?*

The findings shed light on parental neglect's adverse impact, especially on the participant's mental health, self-esteem, confidence, and interpersonal relationships. They also show that the career intervention described in this article helped the participant deal with the negative emotional effects of the parental neglect she had suffered. Aurora remarked towards the end of the third interview:

“You can't wiggle your way out of making, of taking responsibility for your happiness” (I3; 16; 114). “You're responsible for your own mental health. You are responsible for your own sense of self-esteem and self-worth and you can't put it into other people when you feel like it's too heavy” (I3; 15; 106). In addition: “You've got to support yourself not even like on a financial, very basic means and all, but on a higher, you know, your self-actualisation your emotional support, your sense of your security” (I3; 15; 102).

These statements confirm the positive effect of facilitating narratability and constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing, and co-constructing her career-life story on the third layer of her psychological self, namely the autobiographical author (McAdams 2013). After the intervention, she also displayed enhanced determination and self-efficacy (Alexander 2016) in her thinking and behaviour (aspects associated with the motivated agent). Although she initially exhibited some sense of agency, the intervention was an enhancing factor, thus also enhancing the second layer of her psychological self, namely the motivated agent (McAdams 2015a; 2015b). Likewise, she also displayed an enhanced ability to draw on her career-life story (an aspect associated with the autobiographical author).

The research demonstrated the positive effect of the intervention on various facets of the participant's development and sense of who she was (her career-life identity). This is best seen in her own words: “I experienced meaningful personal growth through this process as it helped me to gain a new and more nuanced perspective of myself and the trauma I have experienced.”

The intervention sessions were conducted in 2020 amid hard lockdown regulations due to

COVID-19. During one of the sessions, for the first time in several years. Aurora expressed the need to reach out to her paternal family. This inspiring outcome indicated an enhanced sense of resilience and an ability to gain insight and grow personally.

*How did life design-based counselling influence the career adaptability and resilience of the participant?*

Hartung (2009, 6) relates career adaptability to “career development tasks, role transitions and strategies for dealing with the challenge of how to work through developmental tasks and negotiate crossroads and role transitions”.

The outcomes support Guichard’s (2016) view that this kind of intervention enhances the career adaptability of people who have to deal with trauma and adversity in their career lives. The outcomes also support the view that learners’ social and emotional skills, particularly perseverance, sociability, and self-esteem, rank among the most important drivers of career-life success (OECD 2015).

Career construction theory holds that adaptability is a crucial psychosocial resource for adapting to the workplace (Savickas and Porfeli 2012). The improvement in the participant’s career adaptability supports the views of other authors on the positive impact of career construction and life design-based intervention on young people (Savickas and Porfeli 2012).

Career adaptability has also been linked to hope theory. Snyder (2002, 249) defines hope as “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways”. The participant in this study revealed her hope for her future and her determination to create her own success and happiness.

*How did life design counselling influence the resilience of the participant?*

Ungar’s (2011) theory of social ecology for resilience is based on four principles: decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity. The influence of the intervention on the participant’s resilience is explained below in terms of each principle.

**Decentrality**

The intervention allowed the participant to reflect on her life story and realise how far she had come. The intervention brought about a shift from the participant’s reliance on her internal resources and traits in isolation to a realisation of the availability of environmental resources that could help her gain insight, grow emotionally, and flourish (Ungar 2011).

### **Complexity**

The participant's career-life story was shaped by many social interactions, personal experiences, environmental changes, and traumatic personal experiences that led to her heightened personal development, adaptability, and resilience. She experienced her involvement in the intervention as a positive environmental change that enabled her to gain a more positive sense of self.

### **Atypicality**

The participant's peers often judged the participant for not attending school or displaying aggressive behaviour. She was assisted in accepting and understanding the atypicality of her behaviour, which promoted her resilience as reflected in her taking responsibility for managing her career-life (self-management) (Chiaburu, Baker, and Pitariu 2006).

### **Cultural Relativity**

Aurora's cultural context was first challenged when her mother forced her to participate in *Thwasa* (training to become a traditional healer). She was removed from her white, middle-class environment and taken to a black, rural setting with beliefs, traditions, and rituals that she did not know or understand. It was only after she had been placed in a secure care facility that she was transferred to the children's home. She shared the house with other girls from different cultures, and, due to her *Thwasa* training, she could understand and relate to them. Her traumatic experiences during the *Thwasa* training, her stay at the children's home, and the intervention contributed to her increased adaptability and resilience.

The outcomes reported in this section support Peeters, Caniëls and Verbruggen (2022) finding that career resilience promotes action and the ability to navigate career transitions and changes.

### **Primary research question**

This study aimed to answer the primary research question: "What influence did an intervention based on life design principles have on an emerging adult who had experienced neglect and had reached the stage of embarking on a career?"

Life design counselling involves using people's stories to describe their uniqueness instead of relying only on subjective test scores to determine career trajectories (Savickas 2015). In this study, a life design-based intervention was used to help the participant (Aurora) turn her pain, caused by parental neglect, into hope (Maree 2013) and to enhance her career adaptability and resilience.

The intervention enhanced Aurora's resilience and career adaptability. Exploring her life story for themes and patterns helped her gain new insight into the meaning of her experiences. The process enabled her to focus on the strengths and abilities that had carried her through her adversities and enhanced her adaptability. The freedom to express herself creatively through collages, her painting, and her poem made her feel less anxious and more understood. The intervention helped her enter a new chapter in her life from a position of strength, improved self-concept, and enhanced resilience.

### **Limitations of the study**

As the research was based on a single-case study, the findings are subjective and not intended for generalisation. Queiros, Faria and Almeida (2017) state that it is generally harder to determine causality with case studies. Conclusions are more difficult to reach than with purely quantitative research designs, and the subjectivity of the data collected may lead to doubts about the data's validity. Because of the primary researcher's possible limited objective understanding of the participant's psychological reality (Ratner 2002), an external coder was used to verify the emerging themes of the qualitative data. Qualitative data analysis is also time consuming and difficult because of the overlapping themes. The purposive selection of the participant in the study could also give rise to concerns of bias. Lastly: The participant did not have access to the internet at the children's home, which complicated personal communication during the COVID-19 lockdown periods especially.

### **Recommendations for Theory Development, Research, and Practice**

First, the approach's viability discussed in this article in diverse contexts and on a longer-term basis should be examined. Second, research is needed on the effects of parental emotional neglect on the career decision processes of emerging adults. Third, the long-term effects of a life design-based intervention throughout the career-life of a person who has experienced parental neglect should be tracked. Fourth, educators should receive training on identifying learners experiencing emotional neglect and implementing effective interventions to support such learners. Fifth, research should be done on the effectiveness of such interventions in group contexts. Lastly: Different assessment instruments should be used in diverse contexts when researching different kinds of interventions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Little research is available on the long-term effects of parental neglect on the career choices of emerging adults. Physical abuse and physical neglect often go unnoticed by educators due to

their heavy workload. This study represents a modest attempt to address the gap in the literature (Peeters et al. 2022).

Emerging adults (individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years) are generally actively engaged in exploring and forming their career-life identities (Cox and McAdams 2012). This identity “precedes ... and predicts ... [their] future behaviour”. Typically, in establishing their career-life identity, they compare themselves with their “past selves and their idealized selves” (Cox and McAdams 2012, 39). The intervention described in this article enabled the participant to gain new perspectives on her life experiences thus improving her meaning-making and enhancing her innate resilience and adaptability.

## EPILOGUE

Since submitting the research study, Aurora has started studying for a multi-disciplinary degree in economics at her university of choice. She reported that she has made new friends and that she is working on her interpersonal skills. She is determined to reach her goals and settle into a life she has chosen for herself.

## NOTES

1. We thank the participant for taking part in the project.
2. No financial support was received for this project.

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