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Discursive Validation: A Narrative Tool for Career Counselling with Vulnerable Emerging Adults

While there is consensus that social and political commitment plays a key role in career counselling, most strategies do not address this issue directly and practically. Faced with this challenge, we propose an intermediate narrative tool, called discursive validation, to be included in career counselling settings to promote social and individualised changes that enable the construction of careers for vulnerable emerging adults. Through a case study, we present and discuss the use of discursive validation and evaluate its effectiveness by means of the LACQuA (Life Adaptability Qualitative Assessment), which analyses changes in our participant's personal narrative. The findings indicate changes in reflexivity in clients' narratives and their psychosocial repositioning. The limitations and potentials of the proposed tool are discussed.

Keywords: career counselling, social justice, vulnerability, emerging adults, narrative tool

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which appeared in and consolidated throughout 2020, produced disruptive effects in various dimensions of life, with significant impacts in the field of work and career construction, mainly concerning 'unemployment, worker mental health, the work-family interface, and employment disparities' (Austin et al., 2020, p. 487). Young adults or emerging adults are among the most affected groups globally (Blustein et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2021; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2020, 2022; Recksiedler & Landberg, 2021), both in developed countries (Fronck & Briggs, 2021; Hooley, 2022; Laskowska & Laskowski, 2021; Williams et al., 2021) and in developing countries (Benedicto et al., 2022; Flamini et al., 2021; Sulimani-Aidan, 2022; Tabassum et al., 2021).

The main impacts for emerging adults in post-pandemic life include greater difficulties at the beginning of their careers (Keshky et al., 2020), uncertainty about their career future (Mann, 2021) and a greater susceptibility to unemployment,

underemployment and informal work (Adam-Prassler et al., 2020) as a result of obstacles to employment (Mann, 2021). They experience an increased sense of fear and the lack of confidence about the future, along with a greater reluctance to take risks (Keshky et al., 2020) in the contemporary context of uncertainty and misinformation (Hughes et al., 2021). They are prone to heightened vulnerability (Recksiedler & Landberg, 2021), which is particularly pronounced among young people with low qualifications, from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds and in vulnerable contexts in both developed and developing countries (Flamini et al., 2021; ILO, 2022; Recksiedler & Landberg, 2021). Furthermore, technology and digital inclusion are ambiguous in that they tend, on the one hand, to offer greater career possibilities and, on the other, to be conducive to a reduction in jobs (ILO, 2022).

Arnett (2016) conceptually defined emerging adulthood as a chronological period between 18 and 29 years of age, proposing an extension of the psychosocial moratorium from adolescence to young adulthood. This extension is warranted by the recognition of a period of exploration and identity construction across various dimensions until the age of 29. According to Arnett, the main characteristics of this phase of life are: (a) identity exploration, mainly in the affective and work fields; (b) instability; (c) living in-between (individuals are neither adolescents nor adults); (d) a life marked by possibilities, because no matter what the actual lives of young people are like, they believe that they will fulfil their dreams and create the lives they have imagined for themselves; and (e) a blend of self-centredness and focus on the other.

Arnett (2016) makes it clear that emerging adulthood varies depending on the context and is a non-linear process affected by sociocultural (mainly socioeconomic) factors, rather than a homogeneous and universal phase of human development. Therefore, although the phenomenon is more conspicuous among young people from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds, it is observable across social classes. However, in the lower socioeconomic classes, it is often accelerated due to work-related demands. While young people from higher social classes tend to go through educational changes, those from lower social classes often experience job-related changes.

Emerging adults represent an incipient group in social and working life, who have not yet consolidated their social positions, life trajectories or identity constructions. Consequently, they project the future from actions in the present (Arnett, 2016). The perspective of the future affects decision-making in everyday life and guides life construction, ideas, feelings, plans and thoughts about the future (Parola & Marcionetti, 2022). Accordingly, inability or failure to carry out their plans negatively affects emerging adults' psychosocial well-being, everyday actions and decisions, such as career planning.

Career counselling (CC) is a traditional form of assistance in reflection on and the planning of future work. Career counselling is a deliberate process implemented

with young people, and it is mainly focused on the person-work adjustment (e.g. the trait-factor approach), adaptation (e.g. the developmental approach), learning (e.g. the socio-cognitive approach) or, more recently, on narrative construction (e.g. Life Design) and critical awareness (e.g. career guidance and social justice). According to Sultana (2017), historically, researchers from developed countries produced the most significant theories, methodologies and practices used in CC, which were then imported and applied to the contexts of developing countries. In general, these approaches assume that people enjoy autonomy and the freedom of choice, making well-informed career choices in contexts in which the formalised labour market and social welfare institutions and policies offer educational and working opportunities and career development support.

Therefore, CC has predominantly been centred on the personal dimension and individual resources. The focus on the personal dimension alone may often mean making socioeconomic and cultural barriers invisible. Since developed contexts tend to be more egalitarian and offer autonomy as a clearer possibility, theoretical approaches end up constructing concepts more centred on personal resources than on social ones. In developing or underdeveloped contexts, marked by socioeconomic and cultural inequalities, chances of autonomy are lower, and the focus on psychological issues proves insufficient either to comprehend or to offer support in CC. In proper proportions, this reasoning holds true for any context.

Currently, there are frameworks that propose that the personal dimension should be the focus of CC research and interventions; however, the need to improve them is recognised and expanding their scope of analysis is urged, for example, by Life Design (Nota & Rossier, 2015). Some proposals have indicated the social and institutional dimensions, primarily through the development and implementation of public policies, as the central concern for CC. These proposals argue that attention to the personal dimension tends to individualise and overlook the sociocultural and economic issues inherent in career development processes, placing entire responsibility on individuals (Irving, 2010; McMahan et al., 2008). There are also proposals that attempt to articulate the personal and social dimensions together, as exemplified by the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) (Duffy et al., 2016) and the career guidance and social justice movement (Hooley et al., 2019).

Challenges to contemporary CC, which have been aggravated by the pandemic, highlight the pressing need to contextualise theories, expand and diversify the clientele served, mainly because of socioeconomic and cultural inequalities, and promote social justice through practical solutions with social and political commitment. It has been stressed that '[c]areer development has its origins in the social justice movement. However, social justice has not always been visible as a guiding principle' (McMahan et al., 2008, p. 26).

Multiple authors have emphasised the importance of more socially committed CC practices, but most do not address this issue in a direct or practical way, although there is consensus that social and political commitment plays a fundamental

role in the CC process. Therefore, CC theories and practices that proclaim their social commitment to promoting social justice are relatively numerous (Duarte & Cardoso, 2018; Duffy et al., 2016; Hooley et al., 2019). However, those are still work in progress that needs further improvement, validation and in-depth discussion among CC researchers and professionals to try and confront the challenges encountered (Arthur, 2014; Sultana, 2018).

Among the main criticisms levelled at CC as lacking socio-political commitment is that it is an individualised strategy that fails to recognise diversity and has difficulty serving vulnerable social groups (Arulmani, 2014; Guichard, 2022; Hooley et al., 2019; Sultana, 2022). Following Brinkerhoff (2000), we define *social and political commitment* as the intention articulated and a sustained set of actions undertaken over time by social actors to serve social ends (for example, diversity and social justice).

The proposals for CC with socio-political commitment to diversity and social justice are extremely important for contexts in developing and underdeveloped countries and for vulnerable contexts in developed countries, where autonomy and personal resources are, in general, insufficient for career construction. Given this, CC practices should seek to promote individualised narrative changes and social changes or psychosocial repositioning, uniting personal and social growth. This is still an unfinished project in progress.

Faced with the difficulty and complexity of this undertaking, we can include intermediary strategies in CC practices to promote social and personal changes and simultaneously enable the construction of careers for vulnerable social groups. The fundamental starting point in this respect is heeding these clients' demands with regard to the processes of their career construction. The two that stand out are *psychosocial repositioning* and *legitimacy-claiming* (Arulmani, 2014; Blustein et al., 2005; Guichard, 2022; Winslade, 2005).

We define *legitimacy* as the social recognition of the value of the political order for social dynamics, relations and structures, which produces theoretical concepts and practical models considered true; and we understand *legitimacy-claiming* as the external validation of the person's experiences and life paths, being linked to the position of power they occupy. Duffy and colleagues (2016) and Winslade (2007) explain that career constructions are discursive negotiation processes, where different results depend on socioeconomic and cultural factors, making some people privileged and forcing others to accept limited expectations and construct constrained career projects. Maclean and colleagues (2012) have highlighted that people claim legitimacy through narratives in the field of power relations as a way of constructing meanings that, according to Winslade (2005), can enable individuals to reflect on the effects of discourse on everyone and to create alternative discursive positions. *Psychosocial repositioning* refers to the possibility of personal and social changes happening at the same time and in an articulated way (Silva et al., 2016).

Despite the differences between the possibilities and constraint of different social groups, everyone should have some power over their own life, and CC has the potential to provide this. Emphatically, CC practices should not only generate psychological actions and changes but also foster social actions, causing a psychosocial (re)positioning in which personal and social changes can occur simultaneously.

Along these lines, Winslade (2005) has argued that a privileged form of psychosocial repositioning and legitimacy-claiming is through *discursive positioning*, which enables people to comprehend their own social position and the dominant social discourses that shape their practices and concepts. Specifically, '[d]iscursive positioning leaves theoretical room for changes to be possible on both personal and social levels' allowing 'people to make links between personal stands they are taking and the wider politics of meaning-making in their social worlds' (Winslade, 2005, p. 355). Therefore, *discursive repositioning* entails having a critical awareness of one's position within social metanarratives and using it to strategically reposition oneself within them. This is a process of deconstruction that encourages the emergence of new possibilities. 'From this perspective,' as Winslade explains, 'the purpose of counselling is always political, since it is always about taking a stance within a contest for privileged status of particular meanings' (2005, p. 357).

Faced with this challenge of building strategic devices that can jointly promote social and individualised changes both in a discursive and an objective way, we propose discursive validation (DV) as a narrative tool through which the counsellor together with the client and people in their social group can try and validate the client's personal knowledge about themselves and their contexts, in order to help them construct working projects and make career choices. The discursive validation process includes five general steps. Those are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. The discursive validation (DV) process

Steps	Examples of Interventions	Outcomes
1st step	You've reported several jobs that you have developed. But, at the same time, you always say that you do not work, that you are unemployed. Why do you not regard them as a job? That makes me wonder how you understand a job.	Questioning what is normal: problematising the structures of the world of work and dominant social discourses
2nd step	Are you saying that two different worlds exist, and that yours is a world of difficulties? Why does this happen in your life?	Fostering critical consciousness
3rd step	How about approaching people close to you, especially those you think have a career, and asking them whether they believe you have a career (or not) and why they think so.	Recasting concepts (e.g. the career concept) by inclusive dialogue and knowledge-sharing

Steps	Examples of Interventions	Outcomes
4th step	Having a career isn't for everyone? Your sales colleagues always tell you that they admire your successful career. Based on your work network, I can assure you that you do have a career.	Producing legitimacy
5th step	I came in as someone who was just a regular salesperson and left as someone who has a career. That is brilliant.	Building new work and career understandings, plans and actions

First, we problematise the structures of the world of work and dominant social discourses to subsequently recognise and validate the client's working path as a career through negotiation and intercultural dialogue with the contexts introduced by the client and mediated by the counsellor. DV can be used at any stage of the CC process, whenever a client's narrative calls for questioning and external validation. That is necessary to generate narrative change and psychosocial repositioning.

For DV to have the power to promote social and individual changes in a discursive and concrete way, the process must be based on the joint action of the counsellor, the client, and their community. Therefore, it is important to engage people from the community as active participants in the helping process and support-provision for the construction of projects and contextualised decision-making, evincing an emancipatory perspective for CC informed by social justice (Arulmani, 2014; Blustein et al., 2005; Guichard, 2022; Hooley et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2016).

DV was originally proposed as a political and educational tenet to change the social and educational frameworks in place, and its effectiveness has been proven across contexts and among various groups of people, both for sustaining the dominant system and for changing the status quo (Diduck et al., 2012). DV has been shown to be capable of promoting inclusive dialogues (Benhabib, 2002), generating legitimacy (Diduck et al., 2012; Maclean et al., 2012), questioning what is normal (Hooley et al., 2019), renewing theory (Sultana, 2018), building critical awareness (Duffy et al., 2016) and revising knowledge in a dialogic way (Winslade, 2007).

As defined by Life Design (Nota & Rossier, 2015), adaptability and reflexivity are two significative psychosocial skills that promote the possibility of intercultural dialogue and the assessment of DV outcomes. The former refers to one's ability to anticipate one's future and potential changes demanded by the changing social and work contexts. The latter means a 'process of dialogic interpretation of the self' in which people 'put into action their capacity to create and to define new perspectives when faced with transition situations' (Bangali, Masdonati, Fournier, & Goyer, 2015, p. 23).

The Aim of the Study and the Research Question

Building on the issues discussed above, this article seeks to explore the following research question: Can the inclusion of intermediate narrative tools in CC foster psychosocial repositioning? In conjunction with this, our aim is to propose DV as a narrative tool in CC and demonstrate its potential effectiveness in generating psychosocial repositioning and recognition through supporting symbolic and material inclusion and social and individual changes that enable career constructions, particularly for vulnerable groups such as emerging adults. Through a case study, we depict and discuss the use of DV and evaluate its effectiveness by applying a qualitative narrative tool to analyse changes in the subject's personal narrative.

Method

Participants

The inclusion criteria defined for the case study were: being an emerging adult (between 18 and 29 years of age) of low socioeconomic status, without university education, and having a discontinuous and intermittent working path, with temporary and informal jobs interspersed with moments of unemployment. A fictitious name was used to preserve the anonymity of the participant. This characterisation corresponded to a group that had been extremely affected by the pandemic (emerging adults) from the most vulnerable segments of society, generally having no access to CC services or not benefiting from the interventions it offered, as they were generally designed to assist people from the middle and upper classes. In addition, we recruited the participant in a developing country as a setting that poses greater challenges to career-building because of socioeconomic inequalities and vulnerable working conditions for a large portion of the population (ILO, 2023).

Anna (a fictitious name), our client was a 29-year-old woman of low socioeconomic status, without university education, who had a discontinuous and intermittent working path, with temporary and informal jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment. The counsellor was a 60-year-old white, middle-class woman, with higher education, who worked for a university CC service in Brazil.

Intervention and procedures

Inspired by Life- and Career-Design Dialogues (Pouyaud, Bangali, Cohen-Scali, Robinet, & Guichard, 2016), the proposed intervention generally aims to help clients identify desirable prospects and their position in the social power structure, whereby they are supposed to make sense of themselves and the social and working worlds in a dialogic manner.

The intervention was devised as individual CC (face-to-face) divided into three stages and distributed over ten one-hour meetings, with a planned follow-up meeting three months later. The stages were: (1) the articulation and discussion of demands, expectations and identity issues; (2) an intermediary period of transition; and (3) the construction of an action plan.

Thus-designed, the CC intervention triggered the process of narrative construction, followed by the identification of social discourses in these narratives, the deconstruction of both narratives and social discourses and the reconstruction of the initial narrative. The tools employed were project construction, personal speech, communitarian analysis and DV, which aimed to help expand dialogue, negotiate meanings and integrate differences. As a narrative tool, DV was used throughout the CC process whenever the narrative needed to be deconstructed and reconstructed with a view to external validation and increasing or changing reflexivity and social consciousness.

Assessment instrument

Although DV is geared to triggering personal and social changes, the main way to assess these changes is through the analysis of the narrative construction, deconstruction and reconstruction process, as proposed by Nota and Rossier (2015). Devised by Di Fabio (2015), the Life Adaptability Qualitative Assessment (LAQuA) instrument was used for qualitatively appraising the effectiveness of the CC intervention process by evaluating the 'change or lack of change in an individual's life narrative over time' (Di Fabio, 2015, p. 47). It is an accessory tool that is not used directly with the client, but is employed by the counsellor to take notes and evaluate the CC process as it unfolds.

Based on Life Desing (Nota & Rossier, 2015), the LAQuA consists of 12 questions, with three questions for each of the four dimensions of career adaptability (Concern, Control, Curiosity, Confidence). As elucidated by Di Fabio (2015, p. 45), each dimension assesses, respectively, 'the way we are oriented toward our own future' (Concern), 'the degree to which people feel responsible and capable of determining the construction of their own careers' (Control), 'ability to explore the various working (and education) opportunities' (Curiosity) and 'confidence to be able to pursue one's own aspirations and professional goals' (Confidence). Each dimension has descriptors that indicate its presence, or absence, in the person's narrative (see Table 2).

Table 2. LAQuA questions and descriptors for respective career adaptability dimensions

Career Adaptability Dimension	Questions	Descriptors
Concern	What does it mean to you to be oriented toward your future? Do you think you are oriented toward your future? Why?	Anticipating Predicting Equipping Involved Strategic Aware (of choices and transitions to be made)
Control	What does it mean to you to take responsibility for your future? Do you think you take responsibility for your future? Why?	Positive attitude Autonomous Conscientious Assertive Responsible Honest
Curiosity	What does it mean to you to be curious about your own future? Do you think you are curious about your future? Why?	Investigative Developing Inquisitive Recognising/Discovering Inquiring Searching
Confidence	What does it mean to you to have confidence in your own abilities? Do you think you have confidence in your abilities to build your future? Why?	Productive Mindful Innovative Capable Resilient Able to work out answers

Adapted from Di Fabio A. (2015, pp. 48–50).

The LAQuA qualitatively assesses narrative changes throughout the CC intervention, comparing the narrative production at the beginning and at the end of the process by means of a coding system based on five categories of change. The LAQuA Coding System makes it possible to identify change or no change for each dimension of career adaptability across the levels of reflexivity, including (a) increased reflexivity: reflective deepening of the previously constructed narratives; (b) revised reflexivity: emergence of new narratives; (c) open reflexivity: narrative expansion; (d) enhanced reflexivity: narrative diversification; and e) no change. According to Di Fabio, the LAQuA helps understand personal narratives in counselling situations, as it ‘reassembles individuals’ and shows ‘them in their totality and uniqueness’ (2015, p. 59). That entails including the sociocultural and economic dimensions in this understanding, which results in a greater contextualisation and

validity of the analysis generated, as shown by initial studies in Brazil (Ribeiro, 2022; Ribeiro & Ribeiro, 2019).

The aim of the case study was to identify the way in which reflexivity was produced throughout this process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of the narrative and to establish the level of change achieved. This analytical framework was employed to show how DV facilitates the deepening, revision, expansion, and/or diversification of reflexivity. Reflexivity is an important indicator of narrative changes and psychosocial repositioning.

Case Study

The method of analysis

An exploratory descriptive case study was carried out with a view to integrating DV into CC and evaluating its effectiveness and relevance as an intermediate narrative tool in CC. Case study is defined by Stead and colleagues (2012) as an extensive study of a social phenomenon, a person, or a strategy so as to develop a comprehensive understanding of the object studied and/or appraise its capacities (e.g. testing an innovative method or a strategy within a broader method).

With Schwab and Syed (2015) regarding a qualitative case study as pertinent to explore issues of emerging adulthood, this research design seemed to be an interesting method for testing DV as a CC strategy and drawing some preliminary conclusions about its. As the main aim of the study was to evaluate a specific tool in and for CC, we do not examine the counselling process as a whole below. Instead, we decided to selected germane 'scenes' from the CC process through which we could investigate the effectiveness DV in CC, with attention to the theoretical and technical characteristics involved and insights into the client's changes and achievements. In this framework, a scene can be understood as the relational dynamics in distinct everyday situations in a scenario (the context in which the scene takes place) and developed in a script (how the situations experienced occur), such as in CC (Paiva, 2005).

Data analysis

Based on the LAQuA, the effectiveness of DV in CC was assessed by analysing changes in the client's personal narrative. The counsellor drew up reports of each meeting and those were made available to three judges. They were tasked to produce an independent assessment of the participant's CC processes, based on the LAQuA. Subsequently, the judges individually coded each change in the participant's reflexivity in accordance with the categories included in the LAQuA and defined them by consensus. The coding was performed after a meeting and before the following one. Finally, the effectiveness of DV as a strategy for CC was analysed through the

presentation of scenes from the CC process in which DV was used and produced changes in reflexivity.

Ethical standards

This study was approved and performed in compliance with the Institutional Ethics Committee's recommendations, with the participant providing her informed consent in writing.

Results and Discussion

Our main results are presented and discussed below in five parts: (a) a brief characterisation of the participant, the career counsellor involved and the counselling relationship; (b) a depiction of the main request emerging from the CC process; (c) the identification of the problematic issues arising from the narrative productions; (d) a brief description of the CC process carried out; and (e) the reconstruction of scenes during the CC process in which DV was used as a strategy and triggered changes in the reflexivity.

The characterisation of the participant, the counsellor and the counselling relationship

The client lived in Brazil, which is a developing country with considerable socio-economic inequality and substantial vulnerability in the world of work, marked by high rates of unemployment and informal work (Flamini et al., 2021). According to the ILO (2023), secondary education is considered a low qualification for the labour market, and emerging adults are very likely to be unemployed (30.6%), work in unregulated settings (48%) and have low income (the average monthly income stands at \$290). Young people from the less favoured classes are less likely to study, to obtain good-quality jobs with satisfactory income or enjoy career advancement prospects (Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2019).

Our participant was called by the fictitious name of Anna to ensure her anonymity. She was a 29-year-old woman of low socioeconomic status, without university education, who had a discontinuous and intermittent working path, with temporary and informal jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment. At the time of CC, she was unemployed and complained that she could not find satisfactory jobs. Being young, female, black and from the lower class made Anna part of the population group with fewer opportunities in the world of work in Brazil (Flamini et al., 2021). As an emerging adult belonging to the most vulnerable segment of society with, generally, no access to CC services and/or not benefitting from the mainly middle- and upper-class-targeted interventions it offered, Anna was an eligible candidate for the study.

In line with Arnett's (2016) observations, Anna, an emerging adult, was in the process of constructing her place in the world, stamped by identity exploration, instability and the experience of being in-between. At the same time, consistently with Parola and Marcionetti's (2022) findings, as her sociocultural and economic situation made it difficult to her to discern possibilities for the future prospects and believe that her dreams could come true, she ended up accepting what she was told was her place in the world of work, which affected her prospects. She accepted options offered to her, but because she was not satisfied with that and wanted something different, she sought CC.

Her initial narratives indicated difficulties in obtaining a job, a propensity for unemployment and vulnerability at work, which had been generated by her sociocultural and economic status along with her schooling, considered a low qualification for work, and amplified by the pandemic, as discussed above (ILO, 2022).

The counsellor was a 60-year-old white, middle-class woman with higher education, who worked for a university CC service. Anna's gender, race and class background put her in a socioculturally underprivileged position, as her initial narratives indicated, and she engaged in a counselling relationship in which this situation could be reinforced, since the counsellor was in a position of greater sociocultural recognition. The strategic principle was precisely to change the status of this relationship, seeking greater relational equity. Then, new relational and narrative possibilities could be opened through changes in reflexivity, generating narrative reconstruction and psychosocial repositioning. This principle could promote a practice with greater social and political commitment, as emphasised by Blustein et al. (2005), Duffy et al. (2016), Guichard (2022) and Hooley et al. (2019).

The main demand

Anna said that she sought CC services because she was unemployed and wanted to know what her real vocation should be, as she wanted to enrol at university to improve her job opportunities. She pointed out that her situation was very difficult, she had tried to find a job, but she could not get anything, and she had entered the sales sector as her final option for work. However, she said anxiously: 'so I tried selling; they say that when you're unemployed, the easiest job is sales. But I can't sell.'

Because of Anna's lower-class background, her emerging central issue was that she would not be able to make choices and would have to settle for what was offered to her. However, what was offered to her ('to work in sales') did not bring her satisfaction and did not pan out successfully. 'A salesperson just sells, and that's all they want me to be, which is very frustrating,' Anna said. She was looking for a magic solution to her dilemma through which she could have a satisfactory job in terms of income and personal and social recognition. To study at university appeared as the main strategy to improve her future job prospects.

Anna envisaged an individual educational path to improve her future but had little awareness of the sociocultural and economic determinants shaping her life. Such a passive acceptance of one's current possibilities and future work prospects is characteristic of emerging adults with their sociocultural and economic factors in Brazil (Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2019), where our case study was carried out. If CC retains its focus on individualised strategies and universalised, non-contextualised outcomes that disregard people's life stories, it will not promote effective psychosocial changes. Having this in mind, we knew that the reading of Anna's demands needed to consider the contextual determinants and provide contextualised pathways to generate both personal and social transformations, as recommended by Duffy et al. (2016), Hooley et al. (2019), Silva et al. (2016) and Winslade (2005).

The identification of problematic issues presented by the narrative productions

Anna's narratives revealed her discomfort with the situation that was causing her suffering and her simultaneous lack of a critical comprehension of this experience. She wanted to change her situation by attending university and have her working path socially recognised. Her narratives conveyed the experience of a devalued social position, the construal of her working path as not a career and a naturalisation of this situation, resulting in her passive acceptance of the work opportunities offered. As such, Anna's issues were characteristic of emerging adults with their sociocultural and economic context in Brazil (Dutra-Thomé & Koller, 2019). This reading sought to fulfil the principle of a psychosocial comprehension of the demands, as previously mentioned.

The CC process

Anna started from the position of discomfort and dissatisfaction with her work situation and with little expectation of change, generating narratives of passive acceptance of the work opportunities offered to her. This meant a lack of developed and critical reflexivity, resulting in the naturalisation of her comprehension of reality. Consequently, Anna was unable to reflect on and plan alternative ways to construct her career path.

Throughout the CC work, which was focused on narrative construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, Anna could gradually improve and review her reflexivity. This is a desired result for CC, as advocated by Di Fabio (2015). Anna started from a position where she did not consider herself qualified or possessed of numerous skills. Additionally, she did not perceive herself as having, but rather as wanting, a career, despite already having a significant work record, albeit unrecognised as such. The initial strategy Anna devised was to take a higher education course, adapting to the dominant social discourse. However, there was an alternative that involved considering her trajectory as a career and investing in it.

As a first step, the counsellor, who was a representative of dominant social discourses, validated the narrative of Anna's trajectory as a career, naming it as such. This was insufficient and indicated the centrality of the social and community validation for the possibility of psychosocial repositioning. As already mentioned, to achieve the latter, a counsellor isolated action is not enough, and community support and joint action with the client's community are needed.

Therefore, the second step was to co-construct strategies with the client to validate her narrative in her own work reality, because, otherwise, it would only have been a subjective validation, insufficient to transform the narrative of a work path into a career. Anna was thus encouraged to talk to people of the same age and social status in her neighbourhood to validate her work path as a career and to encourage people from her social circle to do the same, aiming to expand and revise reflexivity, as recommended by Di Fabio (2015). One of the intermediary strategies used to accomplish this aim was DV, where a personal narrative is re-signified through CC and assumes a meaning that is closer to the recognised social discourses (Winslade, 2005).

Working contexts include power games in which the person is entangled, sometimes without being aware of it. The CC process needs to help people understand the position they occupy in this game, more specifically in the world of work, so that they understand the factors that determine their current position. Having comprehended this, they can seek possibilities to transcend it (Hooley et al., 2019). This approach is grounded in and tailored to each individual's reality (Duffy et al., 2016; Guichard, 2022). This process is called awareness raising or conscientization and generates a critical awareness by deepening, revising, increasing or enhancing reflexivity (Di Fabio, 2015).

It is not framed as a learning process in which someone who has studied more (in this case, the counsellor) teaches someone who has studied less (in this case, the client) to be critical. In fact, it is the counsellor who does not know how that person lives from their place in the power games. The counsellor has only a technical knowledge of power games, while the person has an everyday knowledge of the games in which they are enmeshed, and it is in the dialogue between these two knowledges and in the recognition that both matter and that a knowledge can be constructed of the person's position in the context they inhabit (Silva et al., 2016).

Eventually, Anna concluded: 'I came in as someone who was just a common salesperson and left as someone who has a career. That is brilliant.' This observation indicated the effectiveness of CC as it expresses revised reflexivity, to use Di Fabio's term (2015) evidenced by Anna's recognition of the validity of her trajectory.

The use of DV during the CC process and the LAQuA assessment

To illustrate the use of DV, some scenes are presented from the CC process in which it is used as an intermediate narrative tool to contribute to Anna's narrative reconstruction and psychosocial repositioning in relation to the problematic issues she formulated at the beginning of CC. These were: her experience of a devalued social position, her construal of her work path as not a career and the naturalisation of this situation resulting in her passive acceptance of the work opportunities offered. Descriptions of scenes from the CC process and the use of DV in them are followed by brief LAQuA-generated assessments based on the judges' consensus, and the resulting narrative and reflexivity changes are analysed.

Importantly, DV is not responsible for the entire process and its outcomes; nor should it be the only strategy applied. However, it works to consolidate and complete the narrative reconstruction triggered by CC. The outcomes presented below were not generated by DV alone, but rather formalised by it, with the desired reflexivity change being reinforced by it and entailing narrative reconstruction and psychosocial repositioning (Winslade, 2005).

The first scene depicts the counsellor making it clear how some of Anna's characteristics had contributed to her experience of a socially devalued position and that this was not merely a personal issue but a matter of social positioning that could be changed. The aim was to denaturalise this situation and prompt narrative reconstruction with a potential for psychosocial repositioning. That would involve Anna transitioning from the passive acceptance of the work opportunities offered to her to an active search for better options, always with the support of social networks and the public and private employment programmes in place.

Counsellor: 'What would it take for you to move on from the place you're in now?'

Anna: 'Take any job that comes along.'

At that point, Anna realised that she needed to break free from the pattern of naturalising and conforming to what had always been offered to her. She decided not to give up on trying something different anymore. Then the counsellor put the DV strategy into action.

Counsellor: 'They say you're lazy and disorganised, but you're always offered work through your network of relationships, yet you want something more, and it's difficult to find a place. Even more so for a black woman.'

Anna: 'Are you affirming this?'

Counsellor: 'Yes, I am.'

Anna: 'Thank you, thank you so much for your words.'

DV helped Anna revise her reflexivity regarding her psychosocial position, leading her to realise that some of her characteristics (being a woman, being black, not having a university degree) put her in a socially devalued position. At the same time, DV helped her understand that there were alternatives, and that she should

try and obtain access to them with the help of social and programmatic support, particularly from her local community, as recommended by Duffy et al. (2016) and Hooley et al. (2019).

The second scene describes the counsellor using DV to change Anna's comprehension of her work path, which she did not consider to be a career. When asked to talk about her work path, Anna said that she did not have much to report, as her working experience only included three jobs, even though she had worked for almost 15 years at the time. However, through the counselling process, Anna realised that she had done and produced a lot and that she had built a significant work path. At the end of the CC process, after this issue had been discussed and reflected on a lot, the counsellor resorted to DV in an attempt to alter the way Anna understood her own work path in the process of narrative deconstruction and reconstruction followed by social and community validation to cause her psychosocial repositioning.

Counsellor: 'You've worked for almost 15 years, but you said you didn't have much to tell, why?'

Anna: 'I've worked all the time, I've worked a lot, but I don't think I've done anything significant; I've just earned my money.'

Counsellor: 'You've already done a lot and built a meaningful working life. Why can't you call it a career?'

Anna: 'That's the way things are, isn't it?'

Counsellor: 'Is it?'

Anna: 'On second thought, I think I've done a lot in my life, but I didn't know I could call what I'd done work. Can I say, then, that I have a career?'

Counsellor: 'How about approaching people close to you, especially those you think have a career, and asking them whether they think you have a career or not, and why they think so.'

The DV strategy sought to validate Anna's working path as a career and thus to enable her to perceive herself as a subject having rights and entitled to have a career, which she previously did not feel she had. This process involved a reconstruction of knowledge by helping Anna realise that a wide range of working lives could be recognised as valid careers or trajectories with social legitimacy. It exposed Anna to diverse ideas about what a career could look like, aiming for a symbolic inclusion of socially vulnerable groups as a social and political commitment within career counselling (Sultana, 2018, 2022). This narrative deconstruction and reconstruction movement was generated by a revised reflexivity with the emergence of new narratives, according to the LACQuA codification (Di Fabio, 2015).

In the third scene, the counsellor recognised Anna's narrative as valid, placing her in an equitable discursive position, which Anna did not experience in her everyday life, particularly in the context of work.

Counsellor: 'Why do you think you have such a hard time getting a decent job?'

Anna: 'I'm not sure I know. Maybe you can tell me, as you've got a degree and you work in an important position. It's up to you to answer that.'

Counsellor: 'Do I know more about your life than you do just because I work in an important position, as you call it? Or perhaps you are able and entitled to produce knowledge about your own life and your everyday experiences?'

Anna: 'Are you telling me that you, an educated person, want to hear what I have to say and what I think of life and things? People with more education don't do this.'

Counsellor: 'Can't we do that differently?'

Anna: 'Wow, that's a change, can I speak and be heard? You make me believe that things can be different, even though I know it's hard. What a difference.'

In terms of the LACQuA coding (Di Fabio, 2015), Anna underwent a movement of revised reflexivity with the emergence of new narratives. This indicates a significant narrative shift from passivity and submission to the prevalent social discourse to a more active position, attempting to transcend that discourse. Anna managed to break free from the prior narratives that hindered her narrative change and, consequently, her action in the world.

To achieve this end, DV helped Anna deconstruct the devalued social position initially narrated by her, in which her work path was not seen as a career and her work activities were not defined as appreciated. Anna felt unsettled and desired change, but she did not know how to initiate it through her own efforts. Therefore, she sought CC for social repositioning and legitimacy-claiming (Arulmani, 2014; Guichard, 2022; Winslade, 2005). CC was where new relationships of all the parties involved (the counsellor, the client and the client's community of origin) could be constructed, through which Anna could co-construct personal and social changes (Arulmani, 2014). DV emerged as one of the potential strategies for accomplishing this goal.

Previously regarded as and evaluated for its effectiveness as a political and educational principle to change the existing social and educational structures, DV has been theorised as a narrative tool for CC processes (e.g. Winslade, 2005). The study reported in this paper was a new test that confirmed the notion of DV having the potential to be a narrative tool for psychosocial repositioning. We believe that the main contribution of this study is to offer a preliminary assessment of the potential effectiveness of DV in a practical setting. Additionally, based on concepts and instruments devised in developed countries (Europe and the US) and inspired by Life Design, with its focus on narrative co-construction, adaptability and reflexivity, DV has shown some promise of being applicable in developing country contexts as Brazil, where this study was carried out. Further research is needed, involving cross-cultural validation proposals.

Study Limitations

We have identified some methodological limitations of the study and limitations of the narrative tool discussed. In terms of methodology, while the case-study design was fitting for the exploratory aims of this research, we highlight three limitations. First, it was difficult to assess specific DV outcomes in isolation from the other strategies used in the CC process. Second, despite the participant having well-defined sociocultural and economic characteristics and facing similar career issues to people with the same characteristics, caution is recommended in generalising the results. Finally, the DV strategy has only been explored in the context of a developing country, and it is vital to evaluate its effectiveness in other contexts.

In terms of DV as a narrative tool, it is essential to highlight the difficulties both counsellors and clients experience in embracing the goals of social transcendence rather than the strategies of adaptation to what exists, which are often more easily achievable and common in career counselling practices (Sultana, 2017, 2018). Furthermore, sociocultural and economic constraints continue to be significant obstacles that often hinder or prevent any change, even if clients develop an increased critical awareness (Duffy et al., 2016). Further studies are needed to enhance and consolidate the proposed approach with a view to it becoming a recognised tool in CC, a status that it regrettably does not enjoy yet.

Implications for Practice

The findings of our study have important implications for practice, in line with recommendations by Guichard (2022), Hooley et al. (2019) and Sultana (2022). First, the study supports the expand and diversification of the public that is served by CC. Second, it emphasises the effectiveness of using intermediate narrative tools throughout the CC process. Third, it highlights the importance of attending to both personal and social issues in CC, promoting a more socially engaged practice. Finally, it demonstrates that CC has a better chance of success if it is connected to clients' communities.

Conclusions

Our study proposed and evaluated discursive validation (DV) as an intermediate narrative tool for use in CC settings to promote narrative changes and psychosocial repositioning that enable vulnerable emerging adults to construct careers. This tool is believed to be capable of promoting a more socially and politically engaged CC practice with more relevant and contextualised interventions for vulnerable emerging adults who face difficulties related to gender, class and race in their work paths and projects. While always important, this has become particularly urgent in the

post-pandemic period, as emphasised by Adams-Prassl et al., (2020), Blustein et al. (2020), Flamini et al. (2021), Hooley (2022) and the ILO (2022).

Our research has corroborated the theoretical and technical pertinence of the tool. The relevance of this approach is primarily based on the narrative changes observed in terms of diversification and reflective innovation, as assessed by the LACQuA (Di Fabio, 2015). It is also supported by the practical testing of the initial theoretical framework, which has demonstrated its potential as a CC strategy that addresses current demands in the CC field. These demands include the contextualisation of practices, an expansion and diversification of the public served, particularly in response to socioeconomic and cultural inequalities, and promoting social justice through practical proposals with social and political commitment.

We emphasise the importance of extending DV onto communities, first in the counselling relationship and then through negotiation within clients' communities and work contexts, where counsellors act as intermediaries. This process may facilitate psychosocial repositioning and underscores the need for a community-based strategy to diversify the clientele served in CC. Besides, since emerging adulthood is a period of identity exploration, instability and substantial external influence (focus on the other), DV can meaningfully and relevantly buttress emerging adults' autonomy and security in making choices and designing projects, with the counselor as a socially significant other, mainly for vulnerable people who have less power in social relations (Arnett, 2016).

Briefly, we have shown the potential of DV as a strategy for generating alterity and possible ways and means of overcoming social and political barriers to the construction of decent work trajectories. As such, the strategy can help enhance the social commitment of CC practices, as called for by Duffy et al. (2016), Guichard (2022), Hooley et al. (2019), Hughes et al. (2021), Silva et al. (2016) and Sultana (2022).

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