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ARTICLE

Influences on Career Decisions: Collaborative systemic exploration of career influences with young Australian undergraduates

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Abstract

The shifting labor market conditions paired with an increased responsibility to self-negotiate career development have exacerbated employment uncertainties for many young undergraduate students. To support their career development, qualitative career assessment instruments facilitating reflexivity could play a role. This research focused on "Influences on Career Decisions" (ICD) and aimed to explore its use with young Australian undergraduate students and its potential in facilitating reflective careers and employment conversations. Six participants attended career interviews that utilized ICD. Findings revealed ICD's role in the facilitation of a collaborative and systemic career exploration process. Implications for career practice and research are outlined.

KEYWORDS

Australian undergraduates, career counseling, Influences on Career Decisions, qualitative career assessment, systems theory

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century labor market is driven by factors such as technological change, an aging workforce, global migration, and a rapidly shifting world of work impacted by influences such as the COVID-19 pandemic (McMahon, 2020; Pennington & Stanford, 2019). Each year, the workforce in Australia is becoming more mobile. Work that is part-time, casual, freelance, or gig has increased, while permanent, full-time, and long-term contracts are less common (Laß & Wooden, 2019). For example, in 2019, 2 million people started new jobs, and half a million people—nearly 5% of the workforce

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population—changed industry (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018). Today's young undergraduates face a likelihood of an increased frequency of transitioning through different jobs and even careers over their life span (Wehmeyer et al., 2018), suggesting that they are increasingly susceptible to the complex nature of the contemporary world of work (Chesters et al., 2018; Foundation for Young Australians, 2018).

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a sense of "career shock" for many people across a diverse set of contexts, including young people (Akkermans, et al., 2018, p. 4). While the systemic influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on various groups of people, particularly youth, are yet to be fully understood (McMahon, 2020), in Australia, more than a million jobs were lost due to the economic recession of the COVID-19 pandemic (ABC, 2020). Such losses lead to further complications for the career development of young people as one of the most vulnerable groups (ILO, 2021).

Young Australian undergraduate students: Barriers to career development

Australian higher education enrolment trends indicate rapid growth (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For example, 58% of school leavers who had finished Year 12 in 2021 were studying for a nonschool qualification in 2022, with the majority enrolled in a bachelor's degree (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Unprecedented growth in Australian students' higher education engagement partially reflects the impacts of such world of work complexities that introduce unique challenges for their career development (Bennett, 2019). Despite such extensive demands for tertiary education, various barriers disrupt and challenge young people's career development. To secure, develop, and maintain a career in the 21st century, young people spend more time in education-to-employment transitions due to the growing demand for more advanced tertiary qualifications (McDonald et al., 2020). Young people in Australia were increasingly reporting difficulties in navigating their career path (Chesters et al., 2018; James et al., 2020) before the recent complexities associated with the pandemic worsened the situation (ILO, 2022). During the prolonged education-to-employment transitions, many young people and immigrants engage in precarious gig work (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2022; McDonald et al., 2020). While the link between secure work prospects, decent work, and well-being is well established (Allan et al., 2021; Benach et al., 2014), more Australian undergraduates are increasingly reporting feeling hopeless, uncertain, and low in confidence about their future careers (Ruffolo et al., 2021).

It is in such a context that the need for observing, understanding, and supporting young undergraduates' career development is more evident. Befittingly, contemporary career development literature has turned its focus on systemic approaches to career development (Patton & McMahon, 2021), emancipatory career guidance (Hooley et al., 2018), and constructs such as career adaptability (Savickas, 2020) and career resilience (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Lengelle et al., 2017; Maree, 2017) to remain responsive to such social and contextual complexities and in a capable position for unpacking their impacts on young people's career development. Career guidance and counseling have traditionally been considered enterprises that offer support to all people, but mostly adolescents and young people who are making their first career decisions. To offer relevant support to young people, career practitioners innovatively adopt contemporary approaches in their work, which offer different forms of career assessment instruments.

Narrative career counseling and qualitative career assessment

The linear and hierarchical approach to career counseling is being replaced with a more cyclical, reflexive, and contextual approach (Reid & West, 2016). Such changes in career practice are aligned with the "narrative turn" (Hartung, 2013, p. 33) that informs contemporary career counseling while placing more emphasis on stories rather than quantitative scores (McMahon, Watson, & Lee, 2019;

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Savickas, 2020). As such, the need for utilizing qualitative career assessment instruments as "complementary and integral" (McMahon, Watson, & Lee, 2019, p. 421) to narrative career counseling that has recently gained more popularity and appeal is evident in the field (McMahon et al., 2020; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005).

Similar to narrative career counseling, most qualitative career assessment instruments are theoretically developed on the philosophical foundations of constructivism (McMahon & Watson, 2015) and developed with intentions of utilizing similar process constructs that shape narrative career counseling (i.e., "reflection, meaning-making, learning, agency, and connectedness"; McMahon et al., 2012, pp. 134–135; Savickas & Guichard, 2016). Qualitative career assessments aim to facilitate an understanding of the complexities of an individual's career development with a reliance on open-ended, contextual, and holistic processes that are narrative in nature (McMahon, Watson, & Lee, 2019; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005). Through facilitating career storytelling, clients are provided with an opportunity to reflect on their skills, values, plans, past decisions, and influences, among a variety of potential factors that shape their career development and inform future decisions. For young people with no prior experience with the evolving job market, qualitative career assessments offer an opportunity for reflection, learning and meaning-making about self and preferred areas of interests or values, the factors that shaped them, and connecting various aspects of their life and identity, ultimately promoting their sense of agency for taking steps in directions that better align with their preferred accounts of identity (McMahon et al., 2020). On this note, qualitative career assessment instruments have gained more prominence, as well as a higher profile in the last two decades, and include recently designed instruments based on contemporary theories (McMahon, 2019). Examples of a few recent and popular qualitative career assessment instruments include "Life Design" (Savickas, 2019, p. 57), "Pattern Identification Exercise" (Amundson & Smith, 2015, p. 61), "My Career Chapter" (McIlveen, 2015, p. 123), and "My System of Career Influences" (MSCI; McMahon et al., 2015) among many others. The MSCI is based on the Systems Theory Framework (STF) of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

STF of career development and "My System of Career Influences"

STF of career development integrates concepts of extant career development theories and emphasizes the interrelated factors that influence an individual's career decision-making (Patton & McMahon, 2021). The STF has made strong contributions in bridging the gap between theory, research, and practice while accommodating both constructivist and logical positivist career theories (Patton & McMahon, 2021). As an integrative metatheoretical framework, the STF recognizes the complexity of advocating for a more inclusive career development agenda with greater relevance to practitioners, policymakers, communities, families, and individuals (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

Several qualitative career assessment instruments have been introduced based on the STF of career development, namely, "My System of Career Influences" (McMahon et al., 2005, 2015), "My Career Chapter" (McIlveen, 2015), "Influences on Career Decisions" (McMahon & Patton, 2015), and the "Integrative Structured Interview" (McMahon et al., 2020). The MSCI facilitates a reflective space that enables users to identify, prioritize, and contextualize their career decisions and co-construct a personal map of their career influences to make more informed career decisions and plans (McMahon et al., 2015). Facilitation and promotion of systemic thinking for young people was an important outcome of early trialing and an important function of the MSCI (McMahon et al., 2015).

The valuable role of narrative and systemic career explorations has been highlighted for a diverse range of people from different backgrounds (e.g., see Hughes et al., 2013; McMahon, Watson, & Abkhezr, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018); however, to date research on many of the recently developed qualitative career assessment instruments that rely on narrative and systemic approaches remains scarce. There has been some published research on the application of MSCI in different contexts, such as South Africa (Albien & Naidoo, 2016; McMahon et al., 2008), Switzerland (Schindler & Schreiber,

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TABLE 1 Participants' demographics.

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Enrolled program
Marcia	18	Female	Double degree in Psychological Science/Business
Amanda	18	Female	Double degree in Psychological Science/Criminology
Conrad	19	Male	Bachelor of Occupational Therapy
Isaac	20	Male	Bachelor of Physiotherapy
Michelle	22	Female	Bachelor of Counseling
Jane	25	Female	Bachelor of Psychological Science

Note: Pseudonyms chosen as discussed with the participants.

2015), Italy (Sgaramella et al., 2015), and Hong Kong (Yim et al., 2015). However, no research has been conducted on the application of ICD. While completing MSCI could take more than a single career counseling session, a shorter version of it called the "Influences on Career Decisions" (ICD; McMahon & Patton, 2015) might be more beneficial and efficient for some. Neither of the two instruments has been used in researching the career influences of young undergraduate students in Australia and what they might offer for their career planning and decision-making. Therefore, this research aims to explore (1) the processes of using ICD with young Australian undergraduates and (2) ICD's potential for facilitation of a collaborative systemic exploration of young Australian undergraduates' career development.

METHOD

A qualitative exploratory multiple-case study design was used to get a more "experience-near" (Geertz, 2008, p. 311) sense of participants' career narratives while exploring the application of ICD and the systems of influence that shape their career development.

Recruitment and participants

After ethical approval was sought from the university ethics committee, nonrandom purposive sampling was used to recruit six young undergraduate students between 18 and 25 years of age from the university's undergraduate research portal (Table 1). There were several contingencies set in place to protect the participants. After contacting the lead researcher, potential participants were given a package consisting of a "Participants Information Sheet" and a "Consent Form." Participants who agreed to participate returned the signed consent form. Participants had the right to withdraw from participation in the study at any point without repercussions for their academic performance and/or relationship with the researchers. Inclusion criteria required participants to not have current full-time employment (to improve the chances that they might need some form of career support and to improve the relevance of participation) and be Australian permanent residents or citizens (to improve contextual consistency). To maintain anonymity, a pseudonym was considered for each participant.

Instruments and data collection procedures

Influences on Career Decisions

ICD is a brief qualitative career assessment instrument that can be used in career counseling. ICD is primarily informed by the STF of career development and consists of several reflective open-ended

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TABLE 2 Sample ICD questions.

System of influence	Sample question
Individual systems	*There are many things about us that influence our decisions, for example, our personality, interests, gender, physical appearance, etc. What aspect of yourself do you consider that really influenced your career decisions?*
Social systems	*There are usually people who are involved in our decision making, or we may consider the impact of our decisions on them. Could you think of any person in your life who plays/played a part in your decision-making? How?*
Environmental–societal systems	*Sometimes there are other broader social and environmental factors influencing our career decisions such as the location of job opportunities and socioeconomic factors, public transport, how much a decision will cost, or certain government allowances and registration processes that give us credentials, etc. Can you identify some of these influences that might have influenced your career decisions in some ways?*
Change over time	*As you have so far identified some influences on your career decision making, could we now explore the nature of these influences, and whether some of these influences are permanent or change? What have you noticed that may change over time?*
Chance	*In making our decisions, sometimes chance events play a big role. What chance events do you think might have influenced your career decisions?*

Abbreviation: ICD, Influences on Career Decisions.

questions and activities that invite clients to engage in systemic career storytelling. McMahon and Patton (2015) outlined four major aims for ICD: (1) to identify factors influencing career decision-making, (2) to explore the nature of the influences on career decision-making, (3) to prioritize the influences, and (4) to identify where there is room for movement (p. 199). Conducting the ICD involves navigating through several stages with the client. In each stage, influences from one of the systems (e.g., micro, macro) are explored with the client. Clients could also be invited to draw a simple map of each system and write the name of their unique personal influences on the map (e.g., the name of any significantly influential person).

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions on in-person meetings, each participant was invited to participate in a semistructured online career interview (e.g., Zoom). Demographic data such as age, gender, and current program of study were gathered from each participant, followed by a briefing about the interview process. Interview questions were directly from the ICD, which uses systems mapping to facilitate the depiction of the recursive interplay of multiple influences. Given the online nature of the interviews, the STF of career development "diagram" (Patton & McMahon, 2021, p. 92) was once shown and clearly explained to each participant at the beginning of the interview. As such, the reflective questions that guide the systems mapping process for a face-to-face application of ICD were used but the maps were not drawn. The ICD questions explore the context of each participant's career development by depicting the role of each STF of career development's systems of influence. Table 2 outlines a few example ICD questions from each stage of the interview that were linked to various systems of influence (see McMahon & Patton, 2015, p. 199 for a full description of ICD).

Exit interviews

Before ending each interview, an exit interview was conducted to seek participants' feedback on their experiences of engaging in this research and the usefulness (or lack thereof) of such career interviews. This was done with curiosities about the potential learning opportunities the interviews might have offered to each participant (similar to section 6 of the ICD). The entire interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min (exit interviews lasting between 6 and 12 min) and were audio recorded, transcribed

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verbatim, and pseudonyms were assigned. Participants had the option to receive a de-identified version of their interview transcripts to offer changes. The final approved transcripts were used for analysis. Participants received two marks (2% mark toward one of their enrolled courses) in exchange for their time and dedication to participate in this research.

Data analysis

The main interview (ICD) data were analyzed using a theory-driven deductive thematic analysis based on the six STF of career development's categories of influence (individual systems, social systems, environmental–societal systems, change over time, chance, and recursiveness; Patton & McMahon, 2021). Each transcript was first read at least two times by the second author, then color-coded and sent to the first author for a full third round of color-coding review. The two authors met a few times to ensure rigor and consistency, and to achieve a consensus on suggestions raised by the first author about the color-coding. A separate Excel document was then created by the second author for each participant in which the color-coded segments of the transcript were structured into six distinct sheets. This way, it was easier to identify the breadth and depth of each participant's excerpts related to each of the six systemic categories of the STF. The two authors then worked collaboratively to attend to each participant's narratives within each of the six systems of influence of the STF. This enabled the researchers to get a holistic view of each participant's influential factors, as well as identify similarities and/or differences between and within participants. Finally, a separate analytical procedure was used for the analysis of the brief exit interviews. To identify key feedback themes that emerged from the exit interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted, based on the "six phases of thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) on the participants' interview experience, their feedback, and potential participation outcomes.

Trustworthiness was established to ensure that an authentic reflection of the participant's lived experiences was documented by both authors (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). To substantiate the trustworthiness of the research, Guba's (1981) criteria that include steps to improve credibility (e.g., researcher triangulation and member checking), dependability (e.g., keeping reflexive journals and an audit trail), and transferability (e.g., providing thick description about each participant's particular context) were applied.

Researchers background

Caroline engaged in this research as part of her Honours Research Project (Bachelor of Psychology Honours). Peyman acted as Caroline's sole supervisor throughout the year in which this research project was conceptualized and completed. Peyman had previous experiences in completing several qualitative research projects, particularly related to qualitative career assessment instruments. After the first interview was conducted by Peyman, to provide some guidance and an interviewing model for Caroline, she then conducted the rest of the interviews.

FINDINGS

Findings revealed how "Influences on Career Decisions" (McMahon & Patton, 2015, p. 199) facilitated systemic contextual explorations of the wide range of influences that informed and shaped each of the six student's career development. The findings from the six participants are presented under each of the six STF of career development's systems of influence. See Table 3 for sample excerpts from the participants that will be complementary to the content that follows in the findings section.

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TABLE 3 Participants' excerpts.

	Individual	Social	Environmental–societal	Change over time	Chance	Recursiveness
Amanda	I'm a motivated … passionate learner … I want to inspire other women in business. Once I enjoy something, then it's going to happen … I'll always find the motivation … I like the idea of becoming a woman in business to inspire others.	My mom is supportive … being in a very similar field she influenced my decision … it's great to have her approval.	My friends have been out for about a year with no work … there aren't enough jobs… a lot more stability in having a [psychology] degree … if [HECS] wasn't available, this would not be feasible.	Originally when I applied, one of my top options was paramedicine … once I found out there were no jobs … [I realized] psychology aligned with me more … when the time came, I just picked that.	I had no idea what I wanted to do in high school … I got lucky that it [her mother's field of work] was something I really enjoyed … I've built up on that and got more direction.	Staying here on the Gold Coast is a good decision … there are so many opportunities … the plan is to be in a more secure job … I would say my interests and my passion to be here … that's number one.
Conrad	My interests are around sports and being healthy … I can help people become healthier and overcome health issues … I've been really good with people … [these] have inspired me to get into occupational therapy.	I can help people overcome health issues … I can get along and work with people quite well in a lot of situations … I think my mother had a big part in my choice of studying occupational therapy.	Because [of] HECS I can study full-time … when I start working, it depends on where I go … There are heaps of coal mines and they're on good money and if you own your own practice [there], it can be worth a lot more.	I moved from [a rural area] to study … I was talking about physiotherapy and [mother] said that this is quite a similar area.	–	I applied for a few jobs, and this [disability support worker] was the one I really wanted … I got it and it inspired me to get into occupational therapy.
Isaac	It comes down to my ability to empathize with people … to feel what other people feel has really impacted me to go on this path … it comes to my values in helping people	… to have the ability to understand when people go through struggles … I'm really interested in every topic that I've learnt so far in psychology … to understand people's interactions … is something that I would personally love.	It is extremely hard to get a job [in accounting] … looking for long-term job security and being able to maximize the income … I was going to do paramedicine … travelling every day to campus or work put me off from that.	If you asked me this question five years ago it would've been completely different … [migration] played a role in pushing me away from a business mindset to a humanitarian one … I think that's where my mindset started to change … changing my career choice inevitably.	… what shifted me towards the humanitarian field was that I moved here [Australia] … there was all that stress … I started to take an interest in humanitarian work … moving had a big role.	It played a role in pushing me away from a business mindset, to a humanitarian one … if I had to stay there, there would be a ninety percent chance that I would be going into accounting.

(Continues)

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TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Individual	Social	Environmental–societal	Change over time	Chance	Recursiveness
Jane	I find things that interest me, and I obsess until I learn more about it … I gravitate towards people who talk … I am an emotional and protective person … analyzing from a different angle.	Seeing my parents go through their battles in mental health and how different therapies helped [was a motivating factor].	I felt like I had to go to university to have a secure job … probably financial security … being financially independent.	… going through these personal experiences, I've learned over the years to not rush things and make sure it's right for me … psychology was on that list and teaching wasn't.	My parent's battles with mental health … but being familiar with treatment methods and at-home therapies helped.	I've been on and off with psychology … I kept coming back to it … for a very long time I would do what others would tell me … I've started to put my foot down and it has been a big change, but it's been a very hard thing to unlearn … I made a list in my own time … psychology was on that list, teaching wasn't.
Marcia	… to have the ability to understand when people go through struggles … I'm really interested in every topic that I've learnt so far in psychology … to understand people's interactions … is something that I would personally love.	My parents were role models, going to university … my dad passed away … my mum has always said that if she were to study another degree, she would do psychology … [They] play a major role in what I choose.	I looked up the average salary of psychologists … money and financial stability play an important role … becoming a registered psychologist, there are more fields you can go into … more experiences as well.	… it was interesting to see how experiences like that [father's passing] could affect someone's mental state … only then I knew I wanted to do psychology … I think the decision to change took me about a month.	I think my ability to connect with different people from different backgrounds influenced me … I have good people skills and I think travelling made it clear.	–
Michelle	I'm very independent. I had a gap year and that told me that I need to come back … I wanted to be in a more clinical setting … I find it [psychology] very interesting … I like to discover things about people.	My mother has always been encouraging … expectation is there … everyone would love me to finish my degree and do better than my parents … they're proud of me.	I won't get to where I want to be unless I have my degree. I thought a lot about HECS and whether it was worth going to university.	I was doing a lot of support work with child safety … I could never progress [into a different role] … I got back to university because I got to a point where I realized I couldn't get to where I wanted to be unless I had my degree.	–	–

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Individual systems

Participants storied influences of different elements of the individual systems such as motivations, values, abilities, skills, gender, interests, health, and self-concept. For Isaac, *abilities*, *values*, and *interests* were more relevant. His ability to empathize with others was revealed to him when he moved to Australia from South Africa at the age of 17. Before the Bachelor of Physiotherapy, Isaac was pursuing a career in accounting. However, he realized that a career in the helping profession could align better with his newly found values and abilities. However, for Marcia, who was interested in both business and psychology, elements of *interest* and *skills* were influential. Marcia lost her father to cancer, which deeply affected her realization of *skills* and *abilities* to feel empathy for people in tragic circumstances, and thus became motivated to study psychology. Amanda's *interest* in psychology and criminology was driven by her passion for learning about human behavior, which appeared to be personally fulfilling based on her *self-concept*. Conrad valued his health through an interest in sports (played football for 15 years) and highlighted some of his *values*, *interests*, and *abilities*. He considered himself relatable and suitable for a career in occupational therapy. Michelle valued being independent and gained work experience in child safety in her gap year (*values*, *world-of-work-knowledge*), which led to the realization of an *interest* in human behavior, as well as some *skills* and *abilities*. She reflected that a career in clinical psychology would bring her a sense of personal fulfilment. Finally, Jane storied aspects of her *personality* and *interest* in the field of psychology and reflected on her interpersonal *abilities* by classifying herself as an emotional and protective person (*self-concept*). She felt that these qualities enabled her to approach solutions in unique ways. Overall, all six participants reflected on various individual systems, making it the most substantial category of influence along with influences from the social systems. Table 3 outlines further details.

Social systems

Participants storied various elements of the social systems (e.g., peers, family, workplace, teachers, etc.) and how such elements influenced their choices, decision-making, and career planning. Initially, Isaac thought he would become an accountant as he looked up to his father (a chartered accountant; *Family*). However, Isaac's father later encouraged him to work for himself, which then influenced him to revise his plans. His grandparents also influenced his decisions (*Family*), and he felt an expectation had been placed on him as the first grandchild. Similarly, Marcia's parents and sister influenced her career decisions (*Family*). She storied how her involvement with her father's therapeutic journey prior to his passing made her aware of the important role of mental health practitioners (*Workplace*). Marcia also revealed the role of her mother (*Family*) who suggested a degree in psychology. Amanda was unsure of what to study, but with input from various individuals, including her peers and parents, she made a decision (*Peers* and *Family*). Her mother's work in a community center had fostered an interest in psychology. Similarly, Conrad also considered his mother as influential in his decision to study occupational therapy (*Family*). However, he also highlighted the role of interacting with clients and colleagues in his previous work context as a disability support worker as influential (*Workplace*). Michelle's decision to pursue a career in psychology was influenced by her mother's encouragement and her broader family context. She felt an expectation to finish her degree to make her family proud as the only one in her immediate family attaining tertiary education. Finally, Jane shared about her parents' depression following a major car accident and their subsequent process of seeking treatment, which exposed her to different types of therapeutic contexts and processes, and the support they provided (*Workplace*). Her parents also supported her decision to study psychology (*Family*). Overall, the influence of *family* as one of the key social systems was highly visible among the participants' career stories. Only two of the participants highlighted the influence of grandparents, and their workplaces, in addition to parents.

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Environmental–societal systems

Various elements of the environmental–societal systems (e.g., *employment market*, *geographical locations*, *socioeconomic status*) influenced participants' career development. For Isaac, the most salient influences were the *employment market*, his *socioeconomic status*, and campus location (*Geographic location*). For Marcia, future financial stability (*Socioeconomic status*) was the main environmental–societal influence that attracted her to psychology, as well as the availability of a diverse range of job opportunities (*Employment market*). Amanda noted limited paramedicine job opportunities in her town as an environmental–societal factor that influenced her to consider psychology instead of paramedicine (*Employment market*). She also considered the Australian student loan scheme (HECS) an influential factor (*Political decisions*). For Conrad, who moved from a rural area to complete his studies, Youth Allowance and HECS (*Political decisions*), as well as secure future income (*Socioeconomic status*) that enables him to establish his own occupational therapy practice, were similarly important. Michelle also highlighted the role of HECS and Youth Allowance as significantly influential in her educational decisions (*Political decisions*). Jane emphasized the importance of financial independence (*Socioeconomic status*) and how pursuing a career in psychology would afford her job security (*Employment market*) and a suitable income. All participants emphasized some aspects of the environmental–societal systems, with *socioeconomic status* influences emerging as the most influential in all participants' decision-making. While two participants highlighted the influence of *geographic location* on their career choice, three highlighted the role of *political decisions*.

Change over time

"Change over time" (Patton & McMahon, 2021, p. 256) impacted participants' career development, such as change over time in career preferences based on awareness of career needs and social possibilities. A significant change over time influence for Isaac was his migration journey to Australia. Migration afforded Isaac opportunities for self-reflection and meaning-making about his self-concept, interests, and values (individual systems) and was a considerable turning point that facilitated his interest transition from accounting to psychology. Despite having a degree in Business, the passing of Marcia's father triggered her interest in psychology. For Amanda, change over time was related to her gradual interest transition from paramedicine to psychology mostly informed by her friends' input. Amanda believed that over time she made a more informed decision. A similar interest transition occurred for Conrad, from physiotherapy to occupational therapy, for which he considered his mother's influences the most notable. Similar to Isaac, Conrad's migration from a small town to the city was another change-over-time factor. Michelle's study break after high school assisted her in gaining work experience, which, over time, highlighted the importance of having a tertiary qualification. By being involved in her parent's postaccident therapies, Jane gained career perspectives over time, which shaped her interests in psychology. *Change over time* heavily influenced three of the participants (Isaac, Marcia, and Jane) who storied their career development around major turning points, such as migration or a family member's death.

Chance

Participants reflected on how "chance" (Patton & McMahon, 2021, p. 94) and unplanned events (e.g., luck, happenstance, fortune, or accident) influenced their career development. For Isaac, his family's immigration to Australia stood out as a *chance* event that he had no control over but exposed him to new possibilities. Marcia completed Year 12 of her schooling in Belgium and had an opportunity to experience different cultures. Marcia's travels clarified her interest in understanding and connecting with others. Amanda considers herself lucky to gain field knowledge from her mother. Jane's parents'

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car accident was a major (negative) *chance* factor that exposed her to a range of different therapeutic and clinical contexts. Dealing with various health professionals, she gained insights into potential future careers. Overall, the role of *chance* was clear in some participants' career development more than others, but the lengths of the coded excerpts for chance remained significantly lower than in other systems of influence.

Recursiveness

Recursiveness refers to the interaction between various systems of influence (e.g., Individual, Social, Chance, etc.) and how they interact with each other recursively. Recursiveness was evident in all participants' career stories. Some examples will be outlined. For Isaac, recursiveness between the individual system and change over time was highlighted through the immigration process. For Amanda, recursiveness between the individual and environmental–societal systems was evident as she decided to change her location for more employment opportunities that were aligned with her values of job security and personal career interests. For Conrad, recursiveness between the individual and social system, with chance, was notable. His previous job as a disability support worker reinforced aspirations for occupational therapy. Recursiveness between Jane's individual and social systems, with change over time, was significant in that her past experiences influenced how she viewed herself in relation to her future career decisions. A career in psychology has been a constant interest for Jane. She had decided to pursue a career in a field in which she had some experience and insights. Recursiveness between the individual and social systems of influence was the most storied systemic interaction.

Feedback from participants on the interview process

Feedback from the participants about their overall process of engaging in the interviews indicated that they found the interview process useful in two ways. The thematic analysis of the participants' exit interviews revealed two major themes:

Awareness of skills, knowledge, and influential factors

The interviews facilitated deeper reflections for the participants based on the STF of career development systems of influence. Four participants conveyed that after the interview they were able to more clearly understand the factors influencing their career decisions in the past and develop a more holistic view of influences. For example, Michelle stated that she now has "a better understanding of these career factors." Jane made a similar comment:

> I've learnt about myself, which I think is a very good thing to know … that I'm aware of things … the fact that I make a lot of lists and the fact that security is such a big thing for me … I didn't realize that much before.

Reflexivity for future decision-making

Participants reported that the greater self-awareness facilitated by the interview process could contribute to their future decision-makings. Amanda noted that she found the process particularly helpful in making important decisions: "This will be useful especially when I want to make more crucial decisions about what direction I want to take and potentially also finding out some more information about exactly what the path will look like." Others made similar comments. Isaac said: "I'll think about this

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[interview questions] while I am making decisions … to reflect on the things we talked about." Marcia noted: "In future decision-making, I'll think about all of that we talked about today … just in the back of my mind to reflect on these things … it can help."

DISCUSSION

This research explored the application of ICD as a qualitative career assessment instrument while recognizing the importance of gaining a systemic awareness about the factors and influences that shape young Australian undergraduate students' career development. The ever-changing context of the 21st-century labor market (Savickas, 2020) adds to heightened levels of young people's career uncertainty and anxiety, which further highlights the need for relevant careers and employment support (OECD, 2021). The ICD facilitated collaborative and systemic explorations that provided career development reflective opportunities, useful for developing a more holistic understanding of various career influences. The findings extended the evidence base for narrative and systemic approaches to career counseling that use qualitative career assessment instruments (McMahon & Watson, 2015), such as the ICD, to support young people with their career transitions.

Reflexivity, a central component of qualitative career assessment, is linked with promoting a sense of agency so that people can "keep on keeping on" in disorientating contexts (Reid & West, 2016, p. 565). The reflective, contextual, and dialogical nature of narrative approaches to career practice (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017) through the use of ICD was responsive and relevant to these young people. The first aim of this research was to explore the processes of applying ICD and the practicalities of using it with young Australian undergraduate students. Findings revealed how ICD facilitated career storytelling embedded in various systemic contexts as outlined in the STF of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2021). In responding to ICD questions, each participant reflected on the systems of influence that shaped their career decisions, plans, and choices. This systemic exploration occurred in a collaborative environment. The two aims of this research will be discussed further in the following two sections.

Using ICD with young Australian undergraduate students

As a systemic qualitative career assessment instrument, the ICD was successful in facilitating storytelling and self-awareness, similar to MSCI (McMahon et al., 2005, 2015), but in a shorter timeframe. The findings revealed that the ICD aided the participants' reconstruction of richer narratives that inform their career planning and decision-making by systemically reflecting on their unique life-career influences. The process constructs of narrative career counseling (reflection, meaning-making, learning, agency, and connectedness) were evident in various parts of interviews, suggesting the potential usefulness of ICD in facilitating narrative career counseling when working with young Australian undergraduate students (McMahon et al., 2012; Savickas & Guichard, 2016). For example, participants *reflected* on how their systems of influence might have shaped their career development and plans so far. They engaged in *meaning-making* about some of these influences and their resultant career decisions, choices, and plans. Finally, for some participants, these processes resulted in *learning* about self and recognition of certain skills or areas of interest.

Throughout the interview process, participants were able to gain awareness of the various systems of influence that shaped their career planning and decision-making at different stages of their life and in different contexts, and story, visualize, and reflect on the six systems of influence of the STF of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2021). For example, the recognition of the interconnectedness and permeability between different systems of influence (as outlined in the STF) that underpin the ICD was a major point of reflection and reflexivity for the participants (Savickas & Guichard, 2016). The findings indicated that personal, social, and environmental–societal systems of influence

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were easier to recognize and draw upon for these young people, whereas the influence of chance, change over time, and recursiveness was often underestimated. In some cases, participants shared that this newfound knowledge will be crucial for future decisions. Overall, the narrative nature of the interview process (ICD) combined with such systemic realizations encouraged participants to draw some new conclusions about how they have made certain plans and decisions to date and whether they would like to change or maintain such plans and decisions. This reflective self-knowledge generation assisted the participants in forming a more holistic view of themselves concerning their career decision-making process that encompasses the relationship between their various systems of influence (Patton & McMahon, 2021). Such reconstruction of new career stories through ICD reflections could potentially enhance their sense of agency (Savickas, 2020; Yim et al., 2015).

Collaborative systemic career explorations

In line with an emphasis on adopting contextual and constructivist career practices, the STF of career development has made strong contributions by connecting theory, research, and practice (Patton & McMahon, 2021). One such contribution involves the development of qualitative career assessment strategies that emphasize relational aspects of career development (Blustein, 2011). Beyond such emphasis, the findings highlighted how qualitative career assessment procedures enhance researcher/participant or counsellor/client collaboration. Through utilizing ICD in the interviews, this research engaged young Australian undergraduate students in a collaborative systemic career development exploration. This collaborative exploratory process was perhaps the first time for the participants to gain such a holistic view of their career development given that none attended career counseling before. While the STF of career development provided a helpful structure for such explorations, it positioned the interviewer as a curious inquirer about the sources of various career influences from within different systems of influence. This genuine and respectful sense of curiosity from the researcher is a primary characteristic of collaborative practices (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). The presence of such characteristics promotes collaboration between the researcher and the researched (Abkhezr et al., 2020; Clandinin, 2013) and ultimately enhances young people's engagement in a reflexive space within which they can formulate new and preferred career narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). As the participants are engaged in an active narrative performance, they enact an agentic role, one that potentially promotes their sense of "narrative agency" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012, p. 33), enabling them to tell and live new stories of career development. In this way, qualitative career research informed by narrative modes of inquiry can cross boundaries with career practice and move beyond merely collecting data or exploring career instruments (Abkhezr et al., 2020; De Haene, 2010).

Implications for practice

This research highlights the value of qualitative and constructivist ways of engaging clients with their systems of influence through the use of the ICD, as a short version of the MSCI. Particularly, for careers and employment counsellors who rely on narrative and constructivist approaches to career practice, the ICD facilitates rich career storytelling in a short time. The potential role that a systemic and collaborative exploratory process plays in providing a stage for clients' reflexivity was highlighted in this research. This indicates the value of engaging clients in reflective career explorations and how such reflective engagements align with process constructs of narrative career counseling (McMahon et al., 2012; Savickas & Guichard, 2016). The ICD's systemic and collaborative nature also makes it a relevant tool for use with populations from diverse cultural and contextual backgrounds, and the disadvantaged, since the relevance of narrative and systemic career storytelling has been highlighted for working with diverse populations (see Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017; Abkhezr et al., 2022, Hughes et al., 2013; Maree & Molepo, 2016; McMahon, Watson, & Abkhezr, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018).

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Implications for research and future research

With more widespread adoption of narrative and constructivist career practices, there is a need to strengthen the evidence base for all recently introduced qualitative career assessment instruments. Research that can explore the application of such career instruments with different groups (McMahon et al., 2020) promotes a more context-sensitive and experience-near understanding of their application with various groups of people. Advancing such research in a way that "localisms" and "particularisms" (Sultana, 2020, p. 1) are given more rigorous attention can contextually inform career practice and, as such, bridge the gap between research and practice. The need for further research on the application of various qualitative career assessment instruments in different contexts, such as the ICD, is emerging but a gap in research remains. One suggestion for future ICD research could be the application of ICD in the actual context of career counseling sessions with real clients who require career support due to indecision and uncertainty about a career path. Future research could also use ICD in combination with other narrative and constructivist instruments, such as the Pattern Identification Exercise (Amundson & Smith, 2015), the Career Construction Interview (Savickas, 2019), or the Future Career Autobiography (Rehfuss, 2015), in a longer term multi-phased intervention, and with more diverse populations, particularly those facing more challenging career development (e.g., people with refugee and migration backgrounds or people living with disabilities). Finally, given the acceleration in the use of online platforms and social media after the COVID-19 pandemic by many people, including young people, and with the career workforce remaining largely unprepared for such demand (Bimorse & Goddard, 2021), future research could also explore possibilities surrounding the application of qualitative career assessment instruments in social media and online platforms.

Limitations

Although the present findings support the application of ICD as a qualitative career assessment instrument, it is appropriate to recognize this research's potential limitations. One limitation relates to the second author conducting most of the interviews, while leading the analytical procedure, which may have resulted in minor bias, reducing confirmability (Golafshani, 2003). However, all stages of this research were conducted with consistent consultation with the other author to improve trustworthiness. Data rigor was further enhanced by constant triangulation of interpretations, researcher reflexivity, journaling, and peer debriefing between researchers, which substantiated trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All six participants studying in health disciplines could also pose a limitation for this research, and future research could consider the experiences of students from more diverse disciplines.

Restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the possibility of face-to-face interviews, and online interviews were held. This reduced the possibility of actual systems mapping on paper by using the STF of career development's diagram. The diagram was only shown once before the interview. Additionally, while a strong working alliance could enrich the collaborative nature of systemic career explorations, online encounters might have reduced the researcher/researched working alliance (Abkhezr et al., 2020). Many participants canceled, rescheduled, or experienced technical difficulties during the pandemic, which made interview scheduling a timely exercise. Finally, the usefulness of ICD could be more nuanced for the participants if they were seeking career support based on their immediate needs, rather than for research participation.

While this research explored the application of ICD with Australian undergraduate students, some learnings from this research could be relevant for career practice with undergraduate students in other countries with predominantly Western cultural orientations and a similar educational and labor market context (e.g., United States, Canada, or some European countries). However, given the exploratory qualitative design of the research, and the constructivist underpinnings of qualitative career assessment instruments that emphasize the uniqueness of each client's lived experiences, the findings should be considered without assuming that generalization was intended.

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CONCLUSION

This research intended to explore the application of "Influences on Career Decisions" with young undergraduate Australian university students. The research participation provided a systemic understanding of influential factors that have shaped these students' career development. Using ICD in career interviews with this population was demonstrated as a helpful process that facilitated collaborative systemic career storytelling that enhances reflexivity and potentially enhances agency. The findings promote the application of ICD in career practice.

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