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## **Transforming identities and co-constructing careers of career counselors**

### **Abstract**

New theories for practice, which take account of contextual shifts such as labor market volatility, are essential for maintaining the professional status of career counseling. Career construction theory (CCT), as an exemplar of an innovative, contextually sensitive approach not only provides a way of making sense of the turbulent landscapes in which career transitions are taking place, but also provides practical tools to facilitate individual adaptation to change. However, development and evaluation of new theories and related tools have tended to overlook the career development and support needs of career counselors in the adoption and integration of these approaches into their practice with clients, as well as into their own career development. Here, the focus is on supporting the continuing professional development of career counselors as crucial for the enhancement of practice, through the provision in 2017 of an open access online learning program relating to the changing world of work, with facilitation of dialogue and reflection. The adaptive responses of an international group of participants facing challenges of identity transformation in the workplace, which emerged as they worked through the online learning resource, are examined. Four hundred and two international participants registered, with 86 actively engaging in the course, which was made available over three months, with content analysis of their online dialogue providing insights into the processes of psycho-social adaptation to the career-related challenges they faced. The learning design and course delivery were underpinned by the theory of professional identity transformation (PIT), with a commitment to supporting participants both individually collectively to shape their evolving roles and identities in ways compatible with their life themes. In order to progress toward that goal, processes of co-construction, also central to career construction theory, emerged strongly from the content analysis of data.

**Keywords:** career construction; theory, practice; professional identity transformation; online learning.

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As the project was publicly funded, the source content, which was originally delivered as a 6 week course on the EMMA platform, is still available and can be accessed from <https://mooc.employid.eu/the-changing-world-of-work/> . The materials are provided for anyone to use as Open Education Resources under a Creative Commons licence.

### **Highlights**

- Potential synergies between career construction theory and professional identity transformation theory were explored in relation to an international group of career counselors.
- Online learning support was examined as a medium for career professionals to co-construct meaning about their changing roles and identities in rapidly changing contexts.
- Indications were that facilitation of online support represents one method for supporting career counselors under pressure.

## 1. Introduction

Like their clients, career counselors operate in increasingly volatile and pressurized work environments, with many now required to work differently in ways that require shifts, sometimes dramatic, in their professional or occupational identity, for example, integrating technology into their core practice. Like their clients, they have to construct their own meaning of work to survive and thrive, with proactivity and adaptivity crucial for navigating their own increasingly complex and challenging pathways. Contemporary literature reflects upon shortcomings of career counselors, for example, failure to integrate theory and research effectively into practice (Sampson, Bullock-Yowell, Dozier, Osborn, & Lenz, 2017). In parallel, a meta-analysis of evidence relating to the effectiveness of career choice interventions concluded that: “counselor support was associated with the largest effect sizes” (Whiston, Li, Goodrich Mitts, & Wright, 2017, p. 182). So while career counselor support has a positive impact on clients, counselors experience difficulty integrating theory and research into their practice. Here, some wider implications of these two sets of findings are explored. Using a theory of professional identity transformation (PIT), this study seeks to broaden thinking about the enhancement of the effectiveness of career interventions by focusing on the support needs of career professionals delivering these interventions, with particular reference to synergies with career construction theory (CCT). To achieve this goal, the article focuses upon the research questions: how can processes of dialogue centred around careers and identities in an online learning program underpin the development and revision of career counselors’ own identities? To what extent can this approach extend CCT (Savickas, 2013) beyond the formal settings of client-counselor encounters to incorporate counselors’ own identity transformation?

Analysis of empirical evidence, comprising dialogues from an international group of participants engaged in bespoke online learning support that was framed around the topic of the changing world of work, reveals the impact of the changing world of work, on their career practice. Savickas (2013) argues that the focus of career counseling is the development of clients' life themes as career narratives and how they are constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed and/or co-constructed (Savickas, 2013). However, if the career interventions outlined by Savickas (2013), vocational guidance, career education and career counselling, are extended to encompass identity transformation within an existing role, where the life themes are not necessarily substantively changed, then increased attention could be focused upon supporting individuals' career adaptability. By this means, the scope of CCT would be extended beyond client interventions to include other forms of support for career learning and development. By integrating CCT with a theory of PIT (Brown, 1997) it could be possible to have a pedagogic framework to support career counselors in their processes of sense-making upon changes in the world of work and their own careers and identities. In particular, it could illustrate the practical processes by which career and identities could be co-constructed with the support, for example, of tutors or peers, by giving counselors the opportunity to engage in dialogues about changes in their context, the stories they tell about themselves and the types of skill development which could underpin their identity change work (Brown & Bimrose, 2015; 2018). Results from this study indicate the potential value of online learning in providing this support.

## **2. Theory**

CCT "must continue to innovate, not stagnate" (Savickas, 2002, p.185). Accordingly, this article seeks to extend the scope of CCT to encompass identity transformation within an

existing occupational role, by exploring its iterative relationship with the theory of PIT, particularly where life themes are substantively unchanged, as exemplified through an analysis of the online dialogues of a group of international career counselors.

### *2.1 Professional identity transformation and career construction theory*

Professional identities comprise the meanings attached to an individual by the self and others, displayed in attitudes, behaviours and the stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves and others. These meanings and stories are based on social identities, associated with the profession, and personal identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Professional identities are discursively produced, as individuals draw on social norms and discourses of how they present and represent themselves to others. Individual agency and social norms, therefore, interact in a dynamic and iterative way in the discursive production of professional identities (Brown, 1997). Considering learning as a driver of identity development at work which develop and change over time, Brown (1997) developed a dynamic model of professional / occupational identity formation. In this model the process of acquiring a professional identity takes place within particular communities where socialisation, interaction and learning are key elements, with individuals taking on aspects of existing identities and roles, while actively reshaping other aspects in a dynamic way. The formation, maintenance and change of professional identities are always influenced by the nature of the relationships around which they are constructed. Over time these interactions may lead to modifications and reshaping of these same structures, the communities of practice and the individuals' work identities (Brown, 1997).

Further developments in thinking about identity development at work (Brown & Bimrose, 2015; 2018) led to the idea that learning at work can be effectively supported if it is

understood that such learning can be represented as a process of identity development; a process of development in four inter-related domains; and taking place in the context of particular opportunity structures. Three key factors influence learning and identity development at work. The first views learning as a process of identity development: learning as becoming. This is part of the process of the construction of the strategic career and learning biographies of individuals. Key influences in this representation of learning include: the personal characteristics underpinning learning and development: learning through self-understanding; and development of personal qualities: sense of personal agency; personality; motivation (determination); resilience; self-efficacy (self-belief; efficacy belief); commitment to own learning and professional development; career orientation (career decision-making style); and career adaptability (Brown & Bimrose, 2015).

The second way learning and identity development can be represented is as occurring across four domains: relational development; cognitive development; practical development; and emotional development. Learning may involve development in one or more of these domains and development in each domain can be achieved in a number of different ways. Development can be represented thematically, although the extent of development under particular themes can vary greatly between individual cases (Brown & Bimrose, 2018).

The third way that learning and identity development at work can be represented acknowledges that learning takes place in the context of opportunity structures within which individuals operate. These structures may also play a key role in access to work which is rich in learning and development opportunities (Brown & Bimrose, 2018). Overall, career construction, deconstruction, reconstruction and co-construction (Savickas, 2013) over time can be effectively supported if learning to support career adaptability is understood as comprising processes of identity development; skill development in four inter-related

domains; and taking place in the context of particular opportunity structures (Brown & Bimrose, 2018).

Savickas (2005) proposed that CCT addresses “how the career world is made through personal constructivism and social constructionism” (p. 43), with the distinction between these two schools of thought not altogether clear or straightforward (Young & Collin, 2004). Savickas (2013) argues that: “self denotes an emergent awareness that is culturally shaped, socially constituted, and linguistically narrated” ( p. 148). Subsequently, it has been argued that career construction theory represents a “rapprochement” (Patton & McMahon, 2017, p. 5) between the perspectives represented by constructivism and positivist approaches to career counseling. The theory proposes that individuals have a self that is co-constructed from the “outside in” (Savickas, 2013, p.148) through language and interpersonal processes, emphasising the dynamic interaction between self and society, alongside individual learning. It comprises sixteen propositions (Savickas, 2002), grouped into three broad categories: developmental contextualism, relating to the way individuals are embedded in affecting environments; development in social context, referring to the reciprocal shaping of individuals and their contexts in different life spaces (including their work role); and vocational self-concepts, encompassing influences of, for example, parents and role models. The theory regards everyday experiences as representing building blocks from which careers are constructed. Narrative work, referred to as “bricolage”, is an important feature, because this is how careers are constructed (Savickas, 2002, p. 193). Here, it is proposed that a focus on the PIT of career counselors, with their own career construction, deconstruction, reconstruction and co-construction, can extend the type of career interventions to which CCT can be applied. In doing so, it also establishes a symbiotic relationship between the theories that emphasise the thematic importance of career adaptability. Career counselors, like their clients, need to adapt to dynamic labor markets, accommodating work to their lives. As

professionals, they can shape elements of how they work and for those facilitating clients' career construction from within an organizational context, a social or collective dimension to changes in their own roles and career identities is evident. Hence, a model of PIT would help to make sense of these processes (Brown & Bimrose, 2015; 2018). Linking CCT and PIT emphasises the importance of context in the career construction process for counselors, because identities at work have both a personal and social dimension. Career counselors within organizations shape their careers and career narratives, but they do so within a context where their roles, views of others and the management of change within organizations also come into play. An exploration of the professional identity transformation processes of counselors, in turn, provides insight into the career construction and adaptation of career counselors, which in combination have the potential to enhance the service they offered to clients.

## *2.2 The role of technology in supporting career counselors' professional development*

Career construction, through narratives, can provide “a safe space from which clients can seek growth and exploratory experiences” (Savickas, 2002, p. 193). Bringing together CCT and a theory of PIT conceptually we could expect: learning, facilitation and reflection to support conversations about skill development (and skill sets), opportunity structures (context) and identity (as becoming and as narratives).

Using CCT with clients, counselors facilitate reflection through narratives, with the interview being the primary method, with homework used to help develop new attitudes, beliefs and competencies (Savickas, 2002). In comparison, PIT is typically an in-work process where an organization will often offer formal training provision (for example, professional updating courses) and spaces (like discussion forums) to support individual and

collective role change. Savickas (2013) argues that with the arrival of the digital revolution came a new perspective on self as a project, characterised by insecurity and the need for flexibility, with individuals needing to orientate towards possibilities, rather than plans. Given the increasing digitalization of many work processes one question might be: can technology create spaces to drive processes of learning, facilitation and reflection in support of identity development and career construction for career counselors?

Information and communications technology (ICT), which brought the potential for taking career counseling online and has undoubtedly polarized views, continues to be controversial (Bimrose, 2017). It has, however, been providing spaces for peer interaction for some time (for example, discussion forums, online learning courses). A continuing problem has been that the potential of these spaces has often not been realized by turning the spaces into places where much active collaboration actually occurs. Harrison and Dourish (1996) and Dourish (2006) argued that alongside a focus on the structural arrangements that might constrain and enable certain forms of interaction, it was important to pay attention to how the underpinning social practices could be supported. What is increasingly clear, therefore, is that if ICT tools are to become places for learning and reflection in support of identity development and career co-construction, then facilitation should play a major role. This is precisely what the research study, reported here, sought to do.

### **3. Methods**

The research inquiry reported here was part of a larger European research study, which comprised a four year research project partly funded by the European Union (2014 – 2018). The overall aim of the research inquiry was to investigate how technology-enhanced learning approaches to professional development could support the identity transformation of

career counselors at a distance (for details, see: <https://employid.eu/>). Research participants in this study extended to the broad community of international career counseling professionals. Data were collected from interactive dialogues that took place as part of a bespoke online learning resource, both amongst participants, and tutors who performed the role of online facilitators. In line with concern about the need for qualitative reporting standards (Levitt et al., 2018), Morrow's (2005) framework for presenting qualitative research was adopted.

### *3.1 Approach to the inquiry*

The online professional development support for the changing world of work reported in this article was based upon end-user participatory design (Bimrose et al., 2014). This underlying philosophy for the technological design of the online course complemented the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm adopted by the researchers studying participants' views of their context and recognising the impact on the research of their own background and experiences through the online dialogue of career counselors. After designing and delivering a series of pilot blended learning programs in different operational contexts, aimed at supporting the identity transformation of career and employment practitioners (Bimrose, et al., 2014), the learning from these pilots was applied to the development of a separate, generic online learning program that was open to anyone with an interest in the consequences of the changing world of work for the identity development of career counseling, employment and coaching counselors. The resulting online course, which comprised an average workload of 3.5 hours per unit and 17.5 hours in total, was launched in March 2017 on an open access basis, attracting international interest and participation.

### 3.2 *Research Design*

CCT influenced the design of the online course by the incorporation of antecedents of psycho-social adaptation to career-related challenges, with the learning support concerned with the potential processes of, and outcomes for, these challenges. Participants progressed through the online course at their own pace, with access to the course available for three months. Active learner engagement was a core pedagogical approach using discussions and reflection activities, which were triggered by eight tutors (section 3.3, below). The role of the tutors was critical to the success of the online course, as they were using facilitation skills like active listening, paraphrasing and summarizing to support and encourage participation. They used these skills to seek clarification from participants and go deeper into the meaning of the dialogue. They adopted roles as “naïve inquirers” (Morrow, 2005, p.254), because the tutors either had subject expertise in the field of career counseling and/or expertise specific to topics under discussion. Brief biographies of each tutor were available online at the beginning of the module.

Whilst dialogues were structured by the content of the module, they were facilitated by tutors. A high level of interaction was maintained throughout the online course, with at least one tutor logging onto the system on a daily basis. The underlying ethos of the course was one of active learning in a community of interest based around a professional counseling context. Content was structured as five modules: 1) a professional perspective on the changing world of work; 2) coaching and peer coaching; 3) responding to the digital era; 4) labor market information; and 5) reflective practice. The first module focused on how work identities are changing, examining the implications for professional practice. The second related directly to the counseling role, giving counselors the opportunity to reflect upon their roles, and recognise the value of peer support for their own professional development. The third module examined how digital technology is, and could, impact the counseling role. The

fourth focused on the challenges inherent in integrating labor market information into practice. The fifth and final module examined ways to incorporate reflection into practice. A wealth of learning materials was also available as optional homework. Numerical identifiers are used for each participant quotation presented below, to ensure confidentiality and all the comments used, apart from two from tutors, are from participants. The notation convention where links are made to the original source material are a number (1 to 6) to indicate the week/topic of the comment and a second number (1 to 1500) indicating the line of the comment: for example, (2: 992), indicates the comment was made in week 2 and it was the 992nd line of the discussion that week. Throughout the course, participants had opportunities to take part in activities and discussions related to their practice, for example:

I have just tried out the emotional state activity and found it instantly helpful in getting in touch with how different situations feel and the way it affects one's demeanour. I think they can act as a good reference point and just by thinking of the more happy scenario it can assist in reshaping posture, attitude and outlook so that you can respond in a more positive way. I am at an early stage in my career and am currently working on my reflective writing. This exercise will be helpful in assisting me to identify the feelings I need to critically reflect on to develop my understanding of my role as a career practitioner. I am finding the posts of other participants extremely informative and supportive in developing my understanding, and am using it as a form of peer coaching. Thank you. (3: 644)

Illustrations of some of the discussion and reflection activities in the first module (a professional perspective on the changing world of work) of the learning program follow:

- applying these ideas [on working well with others] to your own setting: In the sections above we gave particular examples of how changes in the world of work are affecting [you] ..... As well as sharing information on your professional role, your job title and your background in the discussion below, you may wish to say something about your work context.
- Learning for personal development (not just career progression), who we are and what we do, are questions of learning and identity: Does anything in the above commentary resonate with your own experience or attitudes?
- Four dimensions of learning and identity development: Relational; Cognitive; Practical and Emotional: Which have been the most effective ways you have learned about the importance of relationships in your work?; Do you find that although the knowledge underpinning your practice is important, it can sometimes be hard to transfer that into your day to day work?; How do you keep up with the changing requirements of practice?; What have been the major influences on your own emotional development at work? It might be helpful to examine what types of learning and development are required across the four domains in order for you to achieve your current goals.
- Changing work identities: Has your work organisation changed the way it defines your role? Does this match up with how you see yourself? For example, do you see yourself as a counselor, coach or adviser? How does your job title compare with other professionals contributing to this conversation? Has a job ever given you a sense of career stability? A century ago John Dewey (1916) talked of occupation as giving direction to life's activities, providing continuity and a sense of 'home' with clear psychological, social and ideological 'anchors' and benefits. Do you have an occupation which gives you a sense of an 'anchor' or a sense of

identity? Do you feel that you must struggle alone to build your own career – or that you can simply follow a recognised pathway? Do you feel you have a clear narrative for your career story?

### 3.3 *Researcher-as-instrument*

In qualitative research, the importance of researcher reflexivity is emphasized (Morrow, 2005), with the researcher regarded as the primary instrument (Guba & Lincoln 1981; Merriam 2002). Two groups of researchers participated in the collection and analysis of data for this study, bringing complementary expertise and skill sets that were required for different phases of the research. To ensure openness about the perspectives they brought to this study, a brief description of these two groups is provided. The first group of eight researchers came from three European countries (Austria, Germany, the UK) and acted as tutors, facilitating online dialogues. Each had specialist expertise in the subject area for the module they were facilitating, three had experience of practice as career counselors and all had experience of online teaching and learning. These tutors were careful to be respectful and accepting of all contributions from the online participants. Positioned as co-constructors of meaning with the interpretation of data likely to have a political message (Morrow, 2005), they were particularly mindful of power issues that can exist between researchers and participants since, as tutors the researchers could have been perceived to be in a position of power. This partly informed the decision not to offer any form of formal assessment for the online module.

The second group of nine researchers was involved with data analysis. Four had also been tutors on the online course and were joined by five additional project team members who had both the academic expertise and interest to contribute to the data analysis phase.

These nine researchers were working in the same three European countries as the first group (Austria, Germany, the UK), with three researchers in each of the three country teams. All nine were academics at different stages of their careers. Six were female and three male. The perspectives brought to this research were interdisciplinary, with academic backgrounds spanning the disciplines of psychology, sociology, pedagogy and information systems. This was important since the need for “improving the integration of diverse perspectives into the way we practice, conduct research, and develop theory” was highlighted in 14 of the 19 chapters in a publication focusing on the integration of theory, research and practice in vocational psychology (Sampson et al., 2017, p.191). This research team provided a strong and cohesive group of cross-discipline researchers who constantly engaged in reflexivity, negative case analysis and co-analysis (Morrow, 2005). Rigorous implementation of the fieldwork procedures was effected through: a series of online and face-to-face discussions; by keeping a detailed audit trail; and by developing analytic memos (see section 3.6, below). The overall culture of the major research study was collaborative and cooperative. This was reflected in this part of the study, where there was no single lead researcher. For each of the three country teams, one researcher (in each case, a senior academic) took responsibility for coordinating the team’s contributions, two of whom were female, one male.

### *3.4 Participants*

As noted above, participants in this investigation extended to the broad community of international career counseling professionals. According to CCT, a period of intensive learning is prompted when it becomes necessary to adapt to changing conditions (Savickas, 2013). This was exemplified by the level of engagement with the online learning support provided. To minimise barriers to participation, a simple registration procedure was required,

with participants signing up with a name, e-mail address and self-selected password. They were also asked about their location, language preference and whether they wanted to contribute an optional short biography. In case no information was provided the default setting of the platform used was Italy as location, and English as language. Consequently, no data were collected on the occupational roles or locations of participants. However, many disclosed this information as part of their interactive dialogues. Without a marketing budget or much time for promotion, a total of 402 participants from approximately 20 countries registered for the course. Eighty six of these, mostly career or employment counselors (revealed in their comments throughout the course), actively engaged throughout the course and achieved completion.

### *3.5 Sources of data*

The data analysed are 1135 posts in total, which participants and tutors wrote in the three months' run-time of the course. Data collection was via export from the platform. On average, each post contained more than 81 words. Compared to the large drop-out rates reported for many online learning programs of about 90 per cent (Gütl, Hernandez, Rizzardini, & Chang, 2014) the retention rate for this course was high. An encouraging level of engagement by participants is also evident with 92 per cent of their initial comments having received at least one reply. The data analysis that follows is based on the dialogues of the participants from the online learning program, who discussed the challenges of the changing world of work and how these affected their professional context and the consequent identity transformation. Discussions from the course were extracted from the learning platform in a way that secured anonymity (that is, only data were exported with IDs assigned, not with real names) and the dialogue was analysed during five iterative phases from May to

November 2017, using qualitative methods in an explorative and structuring way, combining deductive and inductive coding approaches (Mayring, 2014).

### 3.6 *Data Analysis*

CCT “does successfully provide a cogent framework for post hoc interpretation and integration of empirical facts” (Savickas, 2002, p. 183). Together with the theory of PIT, these theories provided powerful analytical frameworks for examination of data. Qualitative content analysis was selected as a suitable approach for this study. Content analysis is defined as: “a mixed methods approach (containing qualitative and quantitative steps of analysis)” (Mayring, 2014, p. 6) and comprises a holistic and subjective procedure that is used to interpret and categorize qualitative data. Its purpose is to condense extensive textual data (here, this was the online dialogues of career counselors) into a brief summary format. This process makes sense of the data, describing and highlighting important findings and also enables clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings. Defined as an analytical procedure for: “the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), although some researchers criticize the quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Morgan, 1993). The conventional approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used here, where researchers avoided using pre-conceived categories, allowing the categories to emerge from the data. Increasing usage, and acceptance, of qualitative content analysis is evident in the literature (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Bengtsson, 2016), despite challenges to the methodological dichotomization of qualitative and quantitative research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2014),

Qualitative content analysis has been described as essentially a coding process, with: “coding being the process of transforming raw data into a standardized form” (Babbie, 2001, p. 309). Data were analysed both inductively and deductively in stages. During the data analysis phase, the nine researchers immersed themselves in the data (Morrow, 2005). Specifically, two forms of data analysis triangulation were carried out by researchers to ensure a rigorous and robust approach (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). As explained above (section 3.3), during the process of analysis, three country teams of researchers worked together. They developed a coding scheme, derived from analytic memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) based on more than 1,000 comments through a mainly explorative content coding process (Mayring, 2014), involving five phases. In the first phase, some exemplary comments from the discussion served as a test sample. These were analysed individually by each researcher independently and provided insights about the research material that were shared and discussed. Preliminary codes were then agreed that related to the theoretical concept of identity transformation. In the second phase, country research teams worked independently to analyse the first 25 per cent of comments from the first module (the changing world of work) of the online learning program to create, through an inductive coding process, a refined coding scheme for further analyses. In the third phase, this initial coding scheme, consisting of six major themes (see Figure 1) was discussed amongst the three research teams and tested again on some exemplary comments to increase inter-rater reliability (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000) across the three teams. This also allowed a systematic analysis of the whole data-set. The three research teams shared their interpretations of the emergent codes to enhance the quality of the coding process and to avoid deviations retrospectively. After refinement of the initial coding scheme, the three research teams agreed in the fourth phase of analysis on 30 sub themes, which emerged from the inductive coding process and provided a

coding scheme of the most relevant themes discussed in the online learning program. The initial six themes and 30 sub themes are presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In the fifth and final phase, three of the six major themes were identified as priorities for reporting of the results: organisational embedding, social embedding and identity challenges. These codes were extracted and structured again through an inductive content coding process, which was described in detail, by the three research teams independently, then shared with the research group and discussed. The analysis of the first two themes is reported elsewhere (Schaefer et al., under submission), while the focus of results reported in this article is upon identity challenges. Note also that one of the initial sub-themes is ‘shifting perspectives/major shifts in contextual embedding, organizational embedding, social embedding; personal development; and individual perspectives’. That means that all significant instances of identity challenges are picked up under this code even if the segment is also identified under another theme.

For the coding process, the computer program MAXQDA was used, with codes on the text passages allocated by at least two researchers independently, across the three country teams. In the first round, one researcher applied the codes on the text, while in the second round the researcher reviewed the codes and applied further codes if necessary. This process supports not only the validation of the codes, but also the saturation of the research material. Overlaps between different codes were allowed; therefore, two or more codes could be applied to the same text since some comments were addressing different aspects of the elaborated coding scheme. A shared document (googledrive) was also used by the researchers to record the detail of the process of analysis and amendments to the coding system. This

shared record of the process of coding was regularly discussed, to resolve disagreements and misunderstandings.

It is critical that qualitative research adheres to quality standards for reporting (Levitt et al., 2018; Morrow, 2005). The criteria for trustworthiness identified by Morrow (2005) have been adhered to throughout the conduct and reporting of this study.

#### **4. Results**

From the three major codes that emerged from the analysis, further analysis of the major theme, identity challenges, was relevant for this article. This selection was theoretically informed by the view in PIT theory about the importance of switching the lens to consider individual stories between structure/context; skill development and identities as narratives. As indicated earlier, CCT had been mapped against PIT as both relate to aspects of career construction across the life-course. The online learning program created a space where career conversations could occur and narratives could be co-constructed through interaction with peers and tutors. However, the questions remained: were participants able to co-construct this space as a place for substantive conversations about their own career development and identities, particularly in relation to their skill development and structures (or context) within which they operate; and did they frame their identities in terms of their career narratives?

##### *4.1 Career co-construction conversations about counseling contexts*

Data analysis allowed exploration of how online dialogue about the context and opportunity structures within which identities develop supported, or represented barriers for, participants in the co-construction of their changing work environments, so it is the

participants' dialogues that represent the data for analysis reported below. It should be remembered, however, there was also considerable support from, and interaction with, the tutors, with their facilitation aiming to support the development of an on-line community. Digitalization has had a strong impact on many jobs, including careers counselors working in a variety of settings and will continue to influence the pattern of their work practices in the future. Participants in the online learning program were aware of the challenges and opportunities of ICT and discussed the strategic use of these technologies in counseling organizations in order to improve support for clients.

Some organizations employing participants were developing their digital services and online client support, with four participants outlining how they were coping with the change (2: 210, 922; 4: 330, 536), while one opined that the online approach is not as effective as the face to face counseling because information can be interpreted differently and navigating through websites can be confusing and frustrating (2: 1769). Getting the balance of digital and face-to-face provision is one part of a technology-related challenge and having sufficient confidence to help others develop their digital competences is another:

One of our challenges today is to keep encouraging people to use our digital resources since this part will continue to develop. And at the same time having the option of personal meetings, which some jobseekers prefer or need, for different reasons. Also not all jobseekers have the possibility or access to the technology today for different reasons. (2: 992)

This quote illustrates how one trigger of identity transformation in organizations can be technological change. Several participants responded with their views of how to react to digital challenges and acknowledged that the speed of this change has influenced the way

people work in their daily routines and how business and services are conducted (2: 205, 2015; 4: 536). One also expressed the belief that there is also a need to support counselors delivering online training for clients when career organisations switch to online services, since training support for clients can be absent altogether (2: 335).

The participants engaged in conversations about other aspects of organizational change. Eight stated that their employing organizations were undergoing structural changes that affected their work (2: 36, 41, 324, 526, 1887, 2106, 2289; 3: 846). The large-scale changes included administration and management restructuring, establishing new departments, switching to a regional rather than national delivery and privatization of some counseling services that had previously been publicly funded. One participant had been on parental leave for two years. During that time, the small training and development centre in which they had worked had been transformed into a large organization with more bureaucracy and an emphasis on hierarchy, rather than expertise. There had been a major shift of their work tasks within the new organization and a concern about their role following the change process. The participant felt that they had not found a clear identity for the future, as there was now no fixed path to follow (2: 1887).

Changes in organizations also led to role ambiguity (3: 846) and conflicts in professional identities since new forms of work had been created with which employees had not as yet fully accommodated. Two participants identified a mismatch in organizational training plans between the management's agenda and client needs (2: 1094, 1467). The effects of budget cuts and limited resources were identified by three participants (2: 441; 3: 280, 290), while the financial constraints imposed on training for the professional continuing development of career counselors was discussed by four participants (2: 1064, 1176, 1405, 1462). Such constraints resulted in one participant having to rely on events and activities that carried no financial costs (such as webinars or other online support, 2: 1176). However, four

participants discussed how management support (financial and non-financial) had opened more possibilities to professional growth (2: 1064, 1127, 1452, 1805).

Organizational change could also lead to a significant shift from previous practice, with a new culture embedding different values taking root (2: 1477). The cultural shift in one organization had resulted in career counselors having to take more responsibility to determine their own training needs (2: 1447) and had changed the ways they could, for example, take initiative in the organization (3: 280). One participant explained how the new culture was very bureaucratic and hierarchical, excluding involvement in aspects of the work previously assigned. Consequently, there had been an impact on work identity as they felt they had less influence on the training provided for clients than previously (2: 1887). The introduction of performance targets was sometimes seen as shutting down other aspects of career practice:

As we now work in a more target driven environment, I feel there is little time to engage with employers, which at one time was a large part of what we did. This I feel is a negative aspect of our work as this would enable us to be better informed of changing trends, thus giving us greater knowledge about industries with our clients.  
(2: 880).

A counter view was expressed by another participant, accepting the need for greater flexibility, openness and a stronger market orientation, arguing this requires a mental shift of counselors (2: 526). In addition to discussing major structural concerns, the online course enabled participants to talk about the micro-structures within which they worked: for example, in relation to their work teams and the support they could offer when individuals had to face big challenges or changes in their lives:

This [change] has come about for two reasons, one was due to marital difficulties - I became a single parent of four - requiring me to undertake all duties and activities that this entailed. This has been a big learning curve for me and I have had to become adaptable, I am lucky that I work in a supportive team who have been very understanding about being flexible with me. (2: 2079)

One participant argued that because the counseling process takes time, it is difficult to demonstrate its importance to policy makers. This, in turn, fuels the reluctance to fund training for career counselors (2: 1405). Another participant thought that there was a need to put more effort into the development of counselors' skills since changes are inevitable with counselors only managing to cope with these changes through continuous learning and training (2: 352). Another participant critiqued the policy climate for supporting career counseling: 'So sometimes it seems that the policy climate ..... supports notions of singular, planned careers (and these are often the expectations clients bring ..... ) but the lived experience of people is more chaotic, and flexible.' (2: 845)

Using the PIT model as a pedagogic driver (Brown and Bimrose, 2015, 2018), one aim of the program was to support participants' skill development in cognitive, practical, relational and emotional domains. The above commentary outlines the substantive issues with which counselors engaged in conversations about the contexts in which they were working. The conversations about these issues have a practical dimension, in relation to how they might respond to the changing contexts, and a clear cognitive or sense-making dimension in how they understand these evolving contexts. However, the dialogue also offered relational and emotional support in the co-constructed conversations as the following response from

one participant illustrates in response to another participant remarking “I can sometime feel like an ‘island’” (2: 1064):

This is for [name] - I feel your pain about being an Island & I would welcome the opportunity to connect with you. Like yourself I am in the same boat [qualification level] - I'm self-employed so I'm a whole lot of Island all alone!!! So if I can help you as a peer to peer support connect with me. (2: 1051)

Another exchange turned on the importance of reflective practice and peer support and how these were often lacking in the current context. One participant remarked how in initial training:

There was much emphasis placed on reflective practice and learning. Since qualification I have learnt significantly from relational learning as I had moved from another profession to the world of careers and needed to "see" what careers professionals did. Currently, with such contract driven delivery, I have very little time with my peers so really value when I do get to have a peer reflect on my practice or vice versa. (2: 1084)

The response from another participant was to offer validation, encouragement and to give practical suggestions as to how get additional support from peers:

[name] What you describe should be good practice and that is how we should all be supported. Unfortunately, that was not my experience when I first came to this sector 10 years ago and it isn't now. I am also a member of [institutional name] and I have to

say [name] & her team are creating some good learning programs to engage members and I welcome this with open arms. (2: 1052)

One key point here is not that a single coherent response to changing contexts was generated in the online dialogue, but that the opportunity to talk through such changes proved to be of value for the identity development of participants, by helping them to make sense of sometimes contrasting practices. The online space enabled participants to present narratives that were chronological (expressing their views in relation to the past and future as well as the present), meaningful (enabled them to make sense of changes in context and experience) and social (they had a valued audience for their views) (Elliott, 2005, p. 4).

Another notable feature of the discussions was that there was recognition that identity transformation has a social as well as an individual dimension (Brown, 1997). If individuals wish to shape their occupational and organisational identities in changing contexts they need to engage in activities which help frame their collective as well as their individual identities. The participants took the opportunities afforded by the online learning program to engage in such relational activities which could also be seen to have a strong emotional component about how their roles, identities and careers were evolving. They engaged with tutors and colleagues in co-constructing a narrative about the different ways counselors could and should respond to the challenges of changing technological and organizational contexts.

#### *4.2 Career co-construction conversations about skill development*

Participants talked about some of the ways they could develop their skills in order to adapt to new roles and develop their identities. For those with experience, the value of

collaborative learning with colleagues, involving reflection and engagement with others, was frequently mentioned:

When I do courses together with a colleague, we reflect together, too, but I also discuss with them when I'm considering changes or when I face challenges. We used to reflect together more systematically before - that's something we should get back to. I have a lot of new colleagues and sometimes I reflect on how to build more and/or better co-operation with them. (6: 4)

However, participants felt that it was not always easy in practice to make such exchanges happen. One commented: "In the work I did in the past, unfortunately, it was not always possible to deal with this way of interacting with colleagues and often we did not even exchange tips and suggestions on how to improve. This is not good" (3: 270). Another participant responded how:

In my real life it is quite difficult to convince other colleagues to participate in conversations in this area, but I always try, because I believe it is a very important thing to understand. If this is our world we need to improve it, and start talking together. (3: 821)

However, another participant made the point that learning from reflection does not necessarily need the support or involvement of close, professional colleagues; the group of others who could support your reflective learning could be seen as much broader, especially if getting together with colleagues was difficult:

The notion of 'community reflection' interested me as I feel that keeping a reflective journal is only the start of a process of reflective practice and that by writing ideas and experiences down and analysing them, you naturally want to talk through these reflections with others to get their ideas. I can see how a formal meeting would be beneficial, but knowing the time constraints within the workplace, I find that chatting with colleagues, family and friends informally is equally rewarding in gaining ideas for improving practice and or build on learning. As a case in point, last year I signed up to join a community of practice group, which focused on supporting young people with disabilities and due to different work commitments we couldn't even manage an initial meeting (virtual or otherwise). (6: 236)

Where learning is specifically concerned with practice and developing knowledge, drawing upon expertise from a wider circle than colleagues could be beneficial. One participant talked about the value of social media: "Blogging is another way I keep up to date and I recommend ...Y's... blog on career development" (2: 1467). Another advocated face-to-face contact with colleagues:

I can highly recommend connecting with experienced career practitioners like ..... (people like ..... are also great contacts to have) on LinkedIn either directly or on some of the [name of professional association's] communities of interest, as much of the best CPD advice I have had this year has been from speaking to practitioners directly. Please feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn, as I am always interested in sharing best practice with other careers practitioners! (2: 1040)

As well as for their daily work with their clients; social media was gaining importance for professional development, for example LinkedIn and Facebook:

The LinkedIn group where I belong to is in use only for professional reasons. .... I also have two blogs - one for professional reasons and another one for my friends. As a career counselor I have an opportunity to use CHAT counseling which is pretty new for us and Skype-counseling. We also answer the career questions that come by email.

(4: 562)

Here in [name of country] there is a huge Facebook group of women called the sewing circle (in honour for the old days of ladies gathering together to sew and talk and drink coffee...). This group is totally about giving advice, support and discussing work life, recruitment, how to apply, where to find jobs, how to answer specific interview questions etc. - a really valuable source for a career counselor. Sometimes there are also very sensitive discussions, such as mentioning mental health issues in the recruitment process.

(4: 829)

How does job search and recruitment differ around the world? When talking to people from the Scandinavian branch of LinkedIn, they say that (name of country) LinkedIn users are much slower in activating themselves on the platform, only making use of it when they really are searching for a job. Whereas e.g. US and UK users use the tool and online network on a more ongoing regular basis. To me this reflects the differences in how the different labor markets function. In a country like (country) with various robust systems for helping people shifting careers or jobs, the need for

people as individuals to be 'constantly job searching' is not as high as for people in countries with a lower degree of 'labor market security'. (4: 907-913)

The importance of learning from others was also supported through belonging to a community and the recognition that the online community associated with the course played an important role in their professional identity development. One participant remarked: "It is so positive to be able to discuss issues with colleagues in a safe environment and great for building trust within the work environment" (3: 867). A similar point was made by another participant:

For myself, I find 'practitioner groups' (such as this, but I have equivalents in my own organization) are very useful. The comments about working in isolation are so true. I am in a very small team and am often the only one who deals in certain aspects, so support through practitioner groups and contacts made through these are invaluable. We can share similarly issues and more especially, solutions/problem solve jointly. I also realised that my role has changed within these groups over time, moving from being a 'user' to being confident enough in my knowledge base to be a 'contributor'.  
(2: 1230)

Participants were freely exchanging ideas about how they learn and develop their skills, but were doing so by telling stories in ways in which it was clear that they were also revealing how they see themselves through the narratives they were recounting (Lawler, 2008). The relational dimension to their learning and development was emphasized, with participants acknowledging the importance of learning from and with other practitioners. When a participant started a conversation that involved exchanging practical ideas about how

to support clients' skill development, s/he was encouraged by others endorsing the value of the topic and asking for further information, as illustrated below:

Our most difficult target group - long term unemployed, often from marginalized rural areas - often have a very low level of basic skills and can be confronted with difficult economic and social situation. .... In these cases, the pathway towards and employment is very long. We developed an experimental 'employability factors' framework, that covers identity, motivations, self-knowledge, social and networking skills etc. We try to use this framework to help these people develop skills, attitudes and behaviours that can help them move on their path towards employment, but also in their life. Tough job! But the focus with this target group should be on long-term investment in improving their human capital, because they are so far from the labour market... (2: 592)

A participant from another country responded:

Hi [name], I'm referring to your post because it's similar in [country]. I work both as employment adviser for youth and [name] adviser in our PES. We have the same problem, high unemployment rate and increasing labour market demand. .... It really is a tough job working with long-term unemployed because you are required not only to be an employment adviser, but even more important, to perform as a 'psychotherapist' or a 'psychologist' in order to detect some of the reasons of long-term unemployment and to find the most suitable way to motivate the person to make some life-changing decisions. (2: 602)

One of the tutors drew attention to how “several people have identified how to support people in marginalized rural areas as a major challenge. So we would be very interested to hear more about your framework ....” (2: 597)

The original participant then responded:

Hello [name], hello [name]. We are just starting to use this framework, so no significant data are available yet and this is a version in pilot testing. Here is an article on the website of our national association ... I wrote a blog post [on the platform] with a very European English translation of the framework. (2: 608)

#### 4.3 *Career co-construction dialogues about career counselors' identity narratives*

Dialogues also demonstrated how participants were beginning to co-construct meaning relating to their careers and identities. As well as developing narratives about work context and skill development, the online course supported participants in co-constructing meaning relating to their own changing work identities and how their own careers were developing:

I feel I had a clearer professional identity to others as an occupational therapist. As a careers adviser - the professional status is more vague. In my current role I am called a 'Personal Adviser', which always needs an extra explanation. This external perception of my professional identity does not concern me, I am very aware that it is

the skills and experience I have that will be vital element that enables me to remain employable in the longer term, not a job title. (2: 1840)

Certainly being the only careers adviser within a Higher Education Institution part of my identity is 'clarified' by what I am not, e.g. lecturer, learning support adviser etc. as well as by 'how' I do the work with staff/students. I have vague memories from my MSc [course] about theories which suggested identity is very much more 'external' to an individual rather than an internal script or view of what one isn't in comparison to others. (2: 1923)

A feeling of isolation was evident in the dialogues of a number of participants, for various reasons. For some, isolation was due to their remote geographical location:

I also work in more isolation than I have done in the past (I'm 100 miles+ away from the rest of my team) - and for me I have had to think about ways that I build my relational learning through building virtual teams or connections with people.... Thank goodness that we are now able to access so many resources (like this course!) for free and via technology. (2:1462)

For others, isolation was being experienced even within their own organization:

In terms of learning with others, within my organisation I can sometime feel like an 'island', so have explored links with other schools and local networks to support my learning. It is always good to have a 'buddy' who you can share ideas / seek advice from; learning in isolation can be very lonely. With the [distance learning] course, it

can be quite daunting starting a new unit with a basic reading list and a question. I do miss the face to face support of a mentor as a support. (2: 1064)

[Response]: I feel your pain about being an Island & I would welcome the opportunity to connect with you. .... So if I can help you as a peer to peer support connect with me. (2: 1051)

As illustrated in the dialogue above, technology can be beneficial in overcoming isolation, since it offers the possibility to connect to others. In some instances, this feeling of isolation was linked to fewer face-to-face meetings:

I share the feeling of growing distance totally. Most of my colleagues are situated all over [name of country] in different cities and we communicate using Skype. It's easy to reach people around the country but on the other hand, we almost never see face-to-face because Skype is cheaper. The same goes for my students. Even the colleagues in the same city work from home for a few days every week so often it's pretty lonely at the office. (2: 516)

Dialogue about changes to their own professional identity also focused on the nature of counseling itself:

I am quite surprised that we are still talking about what the future labor market will need and how these new trends will affect future jobs, but I feel like the most important - people themselves - are left out. How they will be affected by constant insecurity in their lives? Many people are enthusiastic about new technologies and

many can learn how to use them and yes, they save time and can be very useful... but I believe many people can be frustrated by these technologies and I don't mean because they can't use them. I mean I have studied psychology because I liked to interact with people - and not by phone or skype or by e-mail - but with real people with their handshakes, movements, tone of voice... I often hear that from many career counselors - they appreciate the help of modern technologies, but still feel the most significant work (at least as they perceive it) is done face to face. (3: 562)

Participants also acknowledged that their identities were affected, just like their clients, by changes to the nature of employment contracts. That some participants were now on fixed term contracts meant that they were aware that they might not stay in the same job long term (2: 441), while in other cases participants were paid on (performance-based) results and were experiencing difficulties in generating sufficient income. They were concerned about whether they could stay in a profession constituted in that way (2: 1137). Eleven participants commented on the lack of time for professional growth, which could undermine notions of professionalism, as high workloads, work pressure, busyness, and range of different work commitments took their toll (2: 922, 1255; 3: 260, 265, 280, 285, 401; 6: 29, 44, 236, 241). One participant (2: 720) mentioned that people often strongly identified themselves in their roles (in the organization) and with the related work processes, so that over time their identities gradually came into line with the new realities. This is an area where changes in context and identity, which involved trying to cope with new roles and related changes, also linked to whether counselors had the required skill sets (and time) to make effective transitions to new roles and identities.

Many quotations presented above relate to participants working in organizations, but freelance work also posed challenges:

I decided to go free-lance and have ended up with a portfolio of work, combining four to five briefs at any one time. I enjoy everything I do, but this new way of working also poses its challenges in terms of managing my workload and meeting everyone's expectations and timelines. It certainly has made me realise even more how important it is to be flexible and to invest heavily in building and maintaining professional networks, not only to keep finding work but also to create a pool of colleagues who can support you away from an office environment. You also have to be able to make sure to keep developing yourself as no one pays you for your CPD [continuing professional development] and stay on top of the administration that comes with invoicing for your time and creating your own bank of resources. Apart from anything else, you have to put in place boundaries that allow you to mentally switch off and enjoy life away from work. So if we want to make sure to prepare our clients for a reality where they constantly adapt to changing circumstances and provide for their own future, we have to be much more serious about teaching them entrepreneurial skills so they are able to steer this process. (2: 262)

It is also worth noting how the participants are themselves facing the challenge of helping their clients, in turn, by co-constructing conversations about their own context, skills and identities:

I work in a lifelong career guidance centre and one of most challenging situations in my work is to explain to unemployed people that times have change and that world of work is not the same as it was five or ten or more years ago. This is especially with

people who are now unemployed after a long working period when I'm trying to motivate them to develop their skills for job searching. (2: 46)

Recognising and responding to trends and being adaptable to change need to become essential skills and it is important for us that students build their knowledge and prepare for their future during their time at university. (2: 175)

Now we are getting clients to improve their career management skills and take control of their own career journey at different times in their life. I also have noticed the greater use of technology in our day to day job and a greater emphasis on more partnership working. (2: 215)

From the above comments it is clear once again how the participants turned the online space into a place where they could present their narratives about their own careers and identities to what is for them a valued audience of their peers (Elliott, 2005, p. 4). There was also a sense in which participants were co-constructing, with tutors and colleagues, ideas about possible evolving roles and future occupational and organisational identities which had a strong social dimension as well as consequences for their changing individual identities. One participant starts a dialogue about changes in counselors' identities by referring to a case example given in the course material:

I was particularly struck by the notion of 'Learning for personal development not just career progression'. I think activating this in our clients is a key to personal emancipation, as [case name] story illustrates. But also in our organization, we have seen that the development of an internal training/sharing of experience system has had

a surprisingly strong impact on the identity of our counsellors - the change from the bureaucratic perspective where counsellors see themselves as 'gatekeepers to social benefits' to a perspective where their role is to help individuals in the development of their social capital is seemingly difficult to measure, but paradigmatic. (2: 1333)

A tutor responded:

Hi [name] - I agree. This week I was in [country] and practitioners there made a similar point about how the shift from adviser to coach fundamentally changed how they viewed their work. (2: 1338)

Another participant also then responded to the original post:

Hi [name] - I agree - a sociologist Carlo Raffo who, over a series of ethnographic studies, has drawn on social capital theory to illustrate the means by which a young person can change conceptions of who they are and who they might become following exposure to authentic interactions with the labour market. The role of counsellors as social capital facilitators is often understated. (2: 1343)

There were short replies offering agreement with the views expressed and then two more counselors made substantive comments as the discussion moves on:

In my experience careers advisers do advocate well for their clients, and are often in contact with training providers, youth workers, colleges and schools to support their client's progression. However, I am not so sure that we always draw what we know

together and advocate at the systems level on behalf of groups of clients with particular needs and interests. We always seem to be a bit low profile, and the fragmentation of the profession in the [country] does not help. (2: 1348)

Advocating effectively is difficult. Same communication skills, but used in a different way. This used to be a focus of training in [country], when employer visits were part of the practitioner's duties. But this is often no longer regarded as a priority. This is somewhat ironic since high levels of competence in advocacy are crucial for working with a social justice agenda. Think about refugees. (2: 1358)

The discussions about counselors' changing identities also helped the participants to feel as if they did belong to a wider community. Following completion of the course, one participant commented: "I liked the discussion very much, and the sense of being a Europe-wide community". Another highlighted: "The value of interacting with practitioners in a number of countries and also receiving first hand input from academics helped me appreciate the importance of being part of a community to develop and reflect on my practice and how the support of others can be transforming". These comments summed up the widespread feeling that together participants and tutors had co-constructed conversations about key aspects of counselors' changing career narratives.

## **5. Limitations and future directions**

The sample was self-selected, with participants opting to take an online course on the changing world of work and then choosing to be active by engaging in online discussion. Participation bias therefore may have resulted since the concerns expressed are likely to

represent those who see the world of work posing a range of challenges for counselors. So participants who may have been feeling that they needed at least in part a new career story as there were problematic elements in their previous narratives may be over-represented in the sample. On the positive side, the online program, by enabling participants to give voice to their concerns, acted to help them co-construct ways of reflecting upon how their professional identities are contextualised, developed and represented in stories of their practice.

More work is required on how best to support career counselors in adapting their practice to meet current challenges. Poell and van der Krogt (2014) in a study of nurses' professional development found that four distinct types of learning paths were identifiable, involving formal learning; self-directed learning; social-emotional learning; and information-oriented learning. They created their own learning paths by selecting a theme relevant to them, conducting a variety of learning activities around this theme, participating in helpful social contexts and making use of learning facilities provided by their organization. A similar study on career counselors would be relevant because it may be that the decline in organizational support and fewer opportunities to participate in social contexts which facilitate learning means those counselors have to find other ways of acting strategically when it comes to their professional development. It may also be helpful to examine critically the extent to which different types of continuing professional development are available for careers counselors.

Another avenue for learning about enhancing practice could be to examine what balance of learning from theory, reflection or from expertise of others is appropriate. More exploration of the consequences of role ambiguity and the range and increasing number of non-counseling tasks that career counselors are expected to undertake would also be welcome. Related to this point, some participants on the online learning program made the point about the extent to which they were able to use career co-construction in their practice

was sometimes constrained by time and resource constraints. In such cases it would perhaps be worth examining the extent to which counselors have to negotiate between an “ideal and current identity” (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007, p. 1530). That is, they may use pragmatic rather than ideal approaches to their practice in different contexts. Participants seemed aware that they could not always practice in ways that aligned to their views of what constitutes effective career counseling.

## **6. Discussion**

The theoretical approach adopted in this article extended CCT by taking as a conceptual starting point life themes, the theme associated in CCT with the formal career intervention of career counseling. The other formal career interventions of CCT associated with vocational guidance and career education are traits and tasks, respectively (Savickas, 2005). In this instance, identity transformation theory is a career intervention, which could be applied in settings where life themes remain broadly in place.

However, identity transformation has a collective as well as an individual component. How occupations and organisations evolve will influence collective and individual identities. For this reason, the support for the career intervention in career co-construction for identity transformation may be a tutor or colleague rather than a counselor. The co-construction process is based upon skill development in four domains (relational development, emotional development, practical development and cognitive development) in order to achieve a degree of career adaptability as roles evolve and context changes. Life themes are the focus of career counseling where the outcome is often career change based upon better alignment to life themes, whereas skill development to achieve greater career adaptability is the focus of identity transformation usually within a developing role and a changing context.

CCT sees the culmination of the career counseling process as one where the counselor supports a client to co-construct a narrative with strong life themes, which can guide their future career development and life design. Yet roles and identities are socially constructed as well as individually imagined and realized. This social dimension means that if individuals are to shape their future occupational and organisational identities when contexts are changing, then they must act collectively as well as individually. Hence those people interested in supporting individual career development should encourage clients, colleagues and students to engage in career conversations about how their careers, roles and identities can be shaped.

The pedagogic approach of identity transformation facilitates career conversations which switch perspectives between changes in context, developing narratives and skill development strategies which support the changes in roles, identities and narratives. This process can be quite difficult to achieve simply through individual reflection. However, the support of a tutor or colleague, or ideally both, in an online learning program offers the possibility of setting up a dialogue, which shifts between the three complementary perspectives on learning for identity transformation (changing contexts, stories, and skill development strategies).

Linking CCT (Savickas 2002; 2013) and perspectives on PIT (Brown & Bimrose 2015; 2018), it is clear that the career counselor supplies emotional support; expertise in relation to cognitive, practical and relational development; and support for client reflexivity in a framework designed to support career co-construction. Here, we explore where this type of support comes from for career counselors facing considerable challenges when the contexts within which they operate, and their own roles and identities are in flux.

### *6.1 Developing counselors' identity capital*

Some career counselors increasingly see themselves as professionals under pressure. They often still possess a strong sense of their own professional identity, but in some cases they are struggling to see how their stories fit with the structure of opportunities available in the labor market; how best to do their job with declining resources; which of their skills needed to be developed further; and where to have conversations about their changing identities. Organizational responses to these pressures vary in the extent to which professional development support opportunities are offered that are engaging. In some instances, online learning is offered, but this can be what Harrison and Dourish (1996) would see as a space for learning and development, which may be rather lifeless and where counselors have not managed to turn it into a place in which they feel they have some influence. Those counselors operating in a freelance capacity may also feel their multiple jobs and contracts mean that they find it hard to find engaging professional development opportunities. Even those counselors willing to take on the responsibility for sourcing their own professional development are faced with the issue of where to find engaging content that is affordable.

However, organizations need to retain, engage and develop key staff who otherwise might leave (Bakker & Demerroui, 2008). Schaufeli, Bakker and Van Rhenen (2009) argue that feeling enthusiastic, inspired and viewing work tasks as meaningful are important aspects of work engagement. Dourish (2006) argued that design of a space for computer-supported collaborative learning could itself be an important social practice. Our methodology for developing continuing professional development support for an online program on the changing world of work comprised end-user participatory design (Bimrose et al., 2014) with counselors being jointly involved in the selection of topics and how best they could be

delivered. The space itself could therefore already include aspects and concerns directly related to counseling practice.

Addressing how the space could be turned into a place (Dourish, 2006) for learning and reflection for counselors in support of their identity development and career construction required facilitation to play a major role, such that facilitators would engage in discussions with every issue raised by a counselor (Schaefer, Rahn, Kopp, Fabian, & Brown, 2018). That the online learning program did indeed lead to active participants feeling enthusiastic, inspired and able to make sense of how their work tasks fitted into a broader picture could be gauged from qualitative comments to that effect.

The online learning program provided a place where participants could undertake the type of identity work described by Savickas (2012) as “the reflexive activities of forming, maintaining, and revising identity narratives” (p. 14). These narrative processes helped participants develop their own identity capital, individually and collectively, which helped them cope with the challenges with which they were faced.

## 6.2 *Supporting counselors' skill development*

Participant dialogue from the online learning program provided evidence of the importance of different types of learning in support of identity development: relational development; cognitive development; practical development; and emotional development (Brown & Bimrose, 2015; 2018). Also of interest is how different combinations of such learning can be utilised in other forms of professional development. The online learning program appeared to have been able to create spaces for informal as well as formal learning in a way which unleashed the power of informal learning to act as a spur for reflecting upon the challenges of changing work practices (Eraut, 2004; Marsick 2006).

Hoare (2017) argues that there are two ways in which employees can reconstitute their jobs without changing careers: “The first is to continually upgrade their knowledge and skills. The second is that of flexibly altering their skill sets so as to increase demand for their functions within the organization and to increase their marketability to other employers” (p. 188). The participants in the online learning program seemed well aware of the need to develop their skills and adapt their skill sets, but it was interesting to see that there was a strong demand to upgrade their knowledge too. The skills focus of much contemporary training does sometimes not address the need for knowledge updating and it was noticeable that the participants responded positively to the opportunity to discuss the ways in which changes to their knowledge and understanding of, for example, the labor market, could impact upon how they believed their work practices would develop in future. There is a recognition that skill development in support of identity transformation needs to have a collaborative as well as individual dimension. In this way, emotional and relational development can be aligned with the practical and cognitive development necessary to underpin identity transformation (Brown & Bimrose 2015; 2018), with collaboration helping individuals co-construct and shape how their identities might develop in future. In such settings, which did not necessarily depend on client-counselor interactions, the focus could be upon how skill development in the four domains could facilitate career adaptability with the intervention comprising co-construction linked to identity transformation. CCT and PIT could then be integrated in a way that would offer practical ways forward with regard to a pedagogy to support the co-construction of identity transformation.

### 6.3 *Identity development: context and individual agency*

Patriotta and Lanzara (2006) outline how a strong identification with an employer can provide a sense of belonging but also help employees feel they have a sense of agency (p. 995). Some of the online program participants felt that recent contextual changes had fractured that identification and they were searching for ways to make sense of the changes, their changing roles and the implications for their own careers and identities. They also signalled that the dislocations of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) were shared by their clients. As one online participant observed: “people who come to me for careers advice are often looking for a clear career plan - but in reality their ability to fully plan a career is challenging in the modern world of work” (2: 845). CCT argues that counselors should help a client to co-construct meaning as to how an individual can navigate existing labor market structures and opportunities in order to find a way forward in their career development in accordance with their life themes. The question is, however, if changes are on the scale outlined above do career counselors also need to have continuing career conversations with colleagues (and tutors) so as to be able to shape proactively responses to changes in their own structure and context?

## **7. Conclusions**

Data from this research highlight how online participants valued being given a space in which to co-construct a debate about their future prospects by switching discussion between issues of context, skills and identities. They were given the opportunity to have conversations about how their professional identities are contextualised, developed and represented in stories of their practice. They were also able to share aspects of their knowledge, skills, understanding, experience and sense-making within a community with an interest in the implications of the changing world of work for themselves and their

profession. Learning in communities is an important aspect of professional identity transformation (Brown, & Bimrose, 2015) and once online participants were given the space for discussion, they transformed it into a place where they could engage in debate about the issues of professional practice, which were most pressing for them. Schaefer et al. (2018) highlight the importance of facilitation in fostering online work-related learning in asynchronous online discussions. It is clear, however, that if ICT platforms are to become places for learning and reflection in support of identity development and career construction, then facilitation should play a major role. This is precisely what the research study, reported here, sought to do.

This article has presented empirical evidence relating to the need for support for counselors working in highly volatile delivery contexts. Career counselors need to undertake continuing professional development to ensure that their practice remains of the highest quality. They need to continue to construct their own careers and transform their own identities. The article has highlighted how processes of dialogue centred around careers and identities (in an online learning program) can underpin the development and revision of professional identities. This approach also showed how it is possible to extend CCT (Savickas, 2013) beyond formal settings of client-counselor encounters to incorporate counselors' own identity transformation by integrating the related theoretical perspective of professional identity transformation. CCT provides a structure for how career conversations in a career counseling context might take place, while PIT provides a structure for how career conversations may take place outside a formal counseling setting. CCT encourages counselors to engage in career conversations with clients, while a focus on PIT can support a community of career counselors in career co-construction conversations about their own context, skill development and career narratives. In particular, the research shows that

computer-supported collaborative learning and facilitated continuing professional development can act as a place for counselors to co-construct such conversations.

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