ARTICLE

Career counselors' experiential reflections on early recollections in career construction counseling

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Abstract

Many studies validate career construction counseling (CCC); however, counselors' experiences of using early recollections (ERs) in CCC have garnered little research attention. Preliminary research among career counselors in Norway has revealed skepticism about using ERs, owing to aspects such as associations with therapy. Therefore, this study examines career counselors' experiential reflections on using ERs in CCC. Through thematic analysis of multistage focus group interviews from action research with 16 career counselors, their experiential reflections on using ERs in CCC were identified. Necessary awareness for using ERs in CCC is discussed, and the study indicates career counselors' raised awareness regarding role understanding and a need for promoting career counselors' emotional and narrative competences. A dual training process is suggested, combining being counseled using CCC with both theoretical and practical training along with a professional community for reflections. Practical implications and limitations are discussed, and directions for future research are suggested.

KEYWORDS

action research, career construction counseling, career counselors' experiences, early recollections, life design

INTRODUCTION

Career construction counseling (CCC; Savickas, 2019a) offers one of many intervention approaches within the life design paradigm (Savickas & Guichard, 2016; Savickas et al., 2009). Although early recollections (ERs) in narrative career counseling have generally been confirmed as a useful methodology (Cochran, 1997; Patton & McMahon, 2006), CCC stands out (Stoltz & Apodaca, 2017b), with a standard question in the career construction interview (CCI) during the first session of CCC: "What are your earliest recollections? I am interested in hearing three stories about things that you recall happening to you when you were three to six years old, or as early as you can remember" (Savickas, 2019b, p. 150). Several case studies confirm the efficacy of CCC for clients related to increased reflexivity (Reid et al., 2016; Vilhjálmsdóttir & Tulinius, 2016); new realizations, revising self, and autonomous development of one's career and life paths (Cardoso et al., 2016; Di Fabio, 2016; Obi, 2015); and processes of client change (Cardoso et al., 2019; Cardoso et al., 2014; Maree, 2015a). However, the experiences of career counselors regarding CCC have received little attention, with only a few exceptions (cf. Cardoso et al., 2020; Rehfuss et al., 2011), and research on their experience of using ERs in CCC appears to be absent.

Career counseling as a professional approach is based on several disciplines, including psychology, pedagogy, sociology, and labor economics (OECD, 2004). While psychology has been a major discipline underpinning theories and methodologies of career counseling in the United States, Canada, and southern European countries, in the Norwegian context, career counseling has traditionally been more pedagogically based (Norendal, 2018; Watts & Sultana, 2004). This is partly because the service in Norway has been composed of school counselors with competence as teachers, and partly because of the lack of professional education or approved certification schemes for career counselors. Fortunately, based on international reports (OECD, 2002, 2014) and a national exposition (NOU 2016), career centers for the adult population have emerged in Norway since 2005, and the competence opportunities for career counselors have increased by, among other things, a master's degree in career counseling established in 2014.

In recent years, the field in Norway has been dominated by career learning and career management skills, emphasized by the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (formerly Skills Norway) and their national system responsibility for career counseling (cf. Bakke et al., 2020). However, several career counselors in Norway are familiar with narrative and constructivist approaches (Kjærgård, 2012), such as *life space mapping* (Peavy, 2000) and *active engagement* (Amundson, 2001). Some have even gained theoretical CCC knowledge through conferences, seminars, and lectures. Based on the author's preliminary studies consisting of questionnaires after CCC lectures with several career counselors from different Norwegian career guidance programs, some were enthusiastic about the intervention's holistic approach, while others were skeptical, partly because ERs are associated with therapy (Norendal, 2018).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate career counselors' reflections on their experience of using ERs in CCC when they achieved *practical and experiential knowledge*. This study is based on action research with 16 career counselors in Norway who received training and explored CCC with each other and their clients. The following research question is addressed based on a thematic analysis of multistage focus group interviews from the action research: How do career counselors reflect on their experience of using early recollections in career construction counseling?

Early recollections in career counseling

ERs have been used in career counseling for quite some time (Maree, 2015b; Stoltz & Apodaca, 2017a). The use of ERs is based on Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology that emphasizes three indivisible and interdependent human life tasks, namely *friends, work*, and *love* (Adler, 1927; 1931/1992). Adler's theory was derived from the psychoanalytic discipline, but he is also referred to

as one of Freud's "breakouts" (Olsen & Køppe, 1996, p. 137). His theory deviates from Freud's as he greatly emphasizes the individual as socially anchored (Abramson, 2016), and by highlighting the cognitive organization and the psychological view people have of themselves and the world (Mosak, 1989). Notably, Adler asked for ERs to employ a projective technique when his clients requested career counseling (Savickas, 2019b). This approach was founded on the idea that individuals transfer and maintain patterns of actions from childhood to deal with the future, and by understanding such recollections, Adler believed that the client's life history could be understood (Mosak, 1958, 1989).

From the 1960s, interest grew in investigating the use of ERs in career counseling based on Adler's projective technique (Clark, 2001; Manaster & Perryman, 1974; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). However, lately, the use of ERs has changed in career counseling, diverting from Adler's use of projection to the integration of ERs in narrative approaches, intending to identify "clients' career adaptability, work identity, and meaningful work experiences" (Stoltz & Apodaca, 2017a, p. 3), as used in CCC (Savickas, 2019b).

Career construction counseling and early recollections

CCC informed the development of and applied principles of career construction theory (CCT; Savickas, 2019b). CCT considers individuals as social actors, motivated agents, and autobiographical authors, concentrating on the construction of the self through work and relationships (Savickas, 2019b). CCC advocates equality in the relationship between client and counselor, where clients are the experts on their stories, while the counselors focus on "forming relationships, prompting reflection, and encouraging sense-making" (Savickas, 2019a, p. 6). CCC usually comprises two sessions, with CCI conducted in the initial session, as a structured dialog to extract clients' small stories (i.e., micro-narratives) and uncover life themes. The CCI commences with an introductory question to elicit the client's transition narrative and establish a working alliance. The five main questions of CCI include (1) role models; (2) favorite TV shows, magazines, or websites; (3) current favorite story from a book or movie; (4) favorite saying or motto; and (5) early recollections (Savickas, 2019b). The ERs must be active specific events, that is, the remembrance of *one* specific experience on a particular day. The client is told to form a headline containing a verb for each recollection, which may reveal the meaning the client ascribes to those incidents. The client is also asked to connect a feeling word for each ER (Savickas, 2019a).

The counselor considers all micro-narratives in light of the client's career challenge and transition narrative after the initial session, assembling them into the client's life portrait (i.e., macro-narrative) using the client's words (Savickas, 2019a). In the second session, the counselor retells the life portrait to the client. Together, they deconstruct and reconstruct the life portrait to create meaning and introduce new perspectives regarding the client's story and current career challenges (Savickas, 2019a). At the end of session two, the focus is on co-construction by defining goals for further exploration and action planning (Savickas, 2019a).

According to Savickas (2019b), the purpose of ERs is to provide new perspectives on career challenges and to uncover a preoccupation that may be turned into an occupation. Besides, the counselor can assess whether pain underlies the ERs and reveals unfulfilled needs. Savickas (2019a) believes memory is actively selective, leading clients to intuitively choose those ERs that pertain to the challenge at hand, narrating the stories they need to hear, which may inspire action. Accordingly, passive pain or needs left unsatisfied can be transformed into active mastering; for example, helplessness can be transformed into independence and fear can be converted into courage (Savickas, 2019a).

In a study by Hartung and Vess (2016), ERs emerged as the most "critical moment" for clients in CCC, as it creates overarching reflection and change in the client. Likewise, Maree (2016b) explained how clients identified ERs as "the most important moment" in CCC, promoting self-reflection and reflectivity. In another research study, he suggested that using ERs in CCC may help clients regain

hope, recover self-esteem, and enhance self-efficacy (Maree, 2016a). Maree (2011, 2013, 2015b) has also presented the "three ERs techniques" based on Adler's theory and CCC, which employed CCC's introductory question and the ERs question, allowing the client's life themes to be the key element in career counseling.

Only a few studies have concentrated on *the career counselor's perspectives and CCC experiences*, and they indicate that career counselors perceive the intervention as helpful and positive (Rehfuss et al., 2011). Some studies have been conducted on the role of career counselors in the CCC process, demonstrating how counselors can use CCC to promote new narratives and encourage changes in the client (Cardoso et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2020) as well as create a culturally resonant career intervention through CCC (Bhalla & Frigerio, 2020). However, none of these studies specifically relate to career counselors' reflections on ERs.

METHOD

Participants

The 16 participants in this action research (10 women and six men) were career counselors from various sectors in Norway. The counselors were recruited through strategic selection (Brottveit, 2018) from professional networks, such as student groups and conferences, and were invited to participate in action research containing CCC training and testing. Invitees were properly informed that they did not need to have any CCC experience before participation since the action research provided both CCC theoretical training and practical experience with other participants and with their clients. They were welcome to offer critical input if they also wanted to learn more about CCC and test the intervention.

All 16 participants satisfied the following selection criteria: work experience as career counselors in at least a half-time position for at least 2 years, formal competence in career counseling (credentialing), relevant knowledge about and experience in using general counseling skills, and motivation to participate, which was evaluated through their expressed willingness to spend time on the project as well as their desire to learn more about CCC. Furthermore, eight participants worked as school counselors with youths (aged 13–19 years), and eight worked with adult clients (aged 19–67 years), respectively, in career centers, Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organization centers, rehabilitation enterprises, or as self-employed individuals. Their formal backgrounds and educations varied and included political science, human resource management, journalism, social sciences, special education, family therapy, gestalt therapy, coaching, and consulting, in addition to everyone having some credentials in counseling/career counseling. Only three participants had previously experienced using CCC in some way, and all participants were encouraged to read an article about CCC (Norendal, 2018) and Savickas' life design counseling (LDC) manual (Savickas, 2015) before the initial action research meeting. During the action research, the intervention was referred to as LDC, which is why this term is found in the participants' quotes instead of CCC. In this study, participants will be referred to as both participants and career counselors.

Procedure

The action research design used in this study was based on co-operative inquiry with cycles between reflection and action (Heron & Reason, 2006). Co-operative inquiry is described by Greenwood and Levin (2007) as one of several varieties of human inquiry, emphasizing both participation and cooperation. The modified form of co-operative inquiry used in this study constituted three all-day meetings over 3 months, with the first lasting 2 days. In these meetings, participation included practical CCC training in plenary and triads (i.e., actions 1 and 3) and individual reflection logs wherein both experiential reflections and questions were shared. Additionally, participants were categorized into two

fixed groups to achieve the recommended group size both for the implementation of three multistage focus group interviews per group (Hummelvoll, 2008), and for collaboration in groups exploring and presenting experiences on the final meeting day. The participants' reflections, both from their reflection logs and from the focus group interviews, were actively used in planning for the next meeting.

During the two periods between the meetings, each participant had to complete and log at least one individual CCC process with a client in their workplace (i.e., actions 2 and 4), where they were free to choose whether they wanted to use all the questions in CCI or just some of them. For ethical reasons, the participants agreed to carefully choose clients with transition or career choice issues, to give them a short presentation of the intervention, and to allow them to decline and ask for a more appropriate intervention. If the clients showed interest in CCC, the counselor clarified that they were free to abstain from answering certain questions. Together, the participants tried out CCC with clients ranging from 17 to 55 years of age. The author functioned as a research manager and training leader, while a colleague participated in all the meetings and functioned as an observer and sparring partner through action research.

The selected data for this study contained transcriptions of audio recordings concerning all six focus group interviews, in addition to transcriptions of plenary conversations following the collaborations in groups on the final meeting day. The focus group interviews used semi-structured interview guides developed by the author and the participating colleague; each guide had eight questions related to CCC reflections and experiences such as "How was your experience of using CCC with your clients?" and "What is your impression of the client's experience and usefulness of the intervention?" Some questions addressed ERs directly, like "If you used the question about early recollections; what was your experience?" and "How important or unimportant do you feel the question of early recollections is when using CCC?" Additionally, ER reflections appeared in connection with other questions. The interview guides were adjusted before each focus group interview to follow up on the previous interview with the same group (i.e., *multistage*). The audio recordings from the focus group interviews were transcribed by Totaltekst, a complete text agency used by both Norwegian ministries and universities. The agency allows researchers to safely upload audio recordings to an encrypted file server, and each transcriber has signed a confidentiality agreement. The author performed the necessary proofreading and quality control and transcribed the plenary conversation.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic strategy, which comprises six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. After reading all the transcriptions (phase 1), preliminary coding was undertaken by the author, based on the study's research question and associative terms to ERs, such as therapy and emotions (phase 2). As the empirical findings had emerged from career counselors undergoing CCC training, the coding procedures were kept broad to capture everything that could be related to their experiential reflections on using ER. Subsequently, phase 3 consisted first of finding links between preliminary codes and statements and sorting them into several sub-themes (about 20 at that point in time). Later, the sub-themes with their codes and statements were sorted into five preliminary main themes. The main themes were given initial names to capture all the underlying sub-themes.

In phase 4, the sorting process was reviewed, and the author re-read all the codes/statements and went back and forth several times between the sub-themes with their codes/statements and the main themes. Some adjustments in terms of moving codes/statements and moving or merging sub-themes were made to achieve optimal cohesion. After this new review, four themes were identified, as

recommended by Braun et al. (2015). The themes and their descriptions were reviewed by two colleagues, which resulted in more precise definitions of the themes, finally named as (1) an extra dimension for clients; (2) new challenges for career counselors; (3) need for training, relationship skills, and faith; and (4) from skepticism to comprehension and interest (phase 5). Phase 6 represents the production of the report (i.e., the presentation of the findings and the subsequent discussion in this study). Due to practical circumstances and limited time availability, the participants were not involved in the analytical process (see the Limitations section).

Ethics and research validity

The action research was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, and all the career counselors signed informed consent forms, which also notified them that they could withdraw from the action research at any time. Furthermore, fictitious names have been used in this study to preserve anonymity.

Reflexivity in the researcher's role and a transparent presentation of both the author's preunderstandings and choices during the process are outlined as key elements contributing to trustworthiness and validity in qualitative research and action research (Finlay, 2002; Lazard & McAvoy, 2020; Levin, 2017; Reason, 2006). Following this principle, I made my preunderstanding explicit in the researcher log before the action research started: I was enthusiastic about the effectiveness of the intervention but still skeptical of the possibility for career counselors in Norway to use CCC, particularly due to the question of ERs and its associations with therapy. The raised awareness about my preunderstanding helped me put these concepts aside to a greater extent to focus on participants' different understandings and experiences. In the analytical process, I identified both challenges and possibilities concerning the use of ERs in CCC in the data material. Even with high awareness of my preunderstanding, this procedure may have tainted the findings; the participants or other researchers may have identified other themes, highlighted other discussions, and reached other conclusions. However, Reason (2006) claims that quality and trustworthiness in action research depend on conscious decisions and transparency, which coincides with my goal in this study:

> The best we can do is to offer our choices to our own scrutiny, to the mutual scrutiny of our coresearchers, to the wider community of inquirers, and to the interested public at large. Quality rests not so much on getting it right but on stimulating open discussion. (Reason, 2006, p. 199)

FINDINGS

An extra dimension for clients

The first theme identified reveals that all the career counselors shared reflections and experiences about how ERs in CCC seemed to improve the understanding clients had of themselves and their situations. The career counselors agreed that the use of ERs promoted wholeness and cohesion in clients' lives, as described by Hilde: "It often goes straight to the heart of the current problem."

Numerous career counselors affirmed that using ERs in CCC gave clients another alternative approach to address career challenges. Kristin stated that the clients acquired an "anchor" through ERs, and Mette was concerned with recollections providing relevant tracks: "Being able to use this [ERs] as a track or clue, what has characterized your personality. This was not just invented by Savickas. It is brain research, really. It is highly relevant."

Hence, this theme refers to how, according to the career counselors' reflections, using ERs in CCC provided clients with an anchor and a feeling of completeness and cohesion in their lives, which may be used as a further track. The career counselors experienced that this intervention's use of ERs offered an alternative approach to address clients' career challenges.

New challenges for career counselors

The next theme identified highlights the career counselors' reflections on how ERs in CCC created new challenges and responsibilities in their roles as career counselors. When using ERs, all the career counselors agreed to show profound respect to the clients. They informed clients that answering the ERs question was voluntary; however, no client declined to answer the question. Some career counselors found it necessary to clarify CCC as a different career intervention. Others emphasized that the intervention may benefit from the client being unprepared and being open to the unforeseen.

The counselors reflected differently on their role in using ERs. Some only selected those clients whom they knew would not bring "heavy baggage" with them. These counselors were concerned that the intervention bordered on therapy and that they needed to proceed with caution, as described by Ella: "Much of this is obviously linked to emotions, maybe withholding ones, perhaps not spoken about, or put into words before. Really, we are counselors – we are not therapists."

Other career counselors believed that they should not fear talking about difficult themes in clients' lives if they could manage the situation respectfully and referred the clients to other experts if necessary. Johanna underlined that this practice would require career counselors to be confident themselves: "It is simply about us having the courage to deal with it there and then when things suddenly … we hear about things that we feel are uncomfortable. We must dare to deal with this." Correspondingly, Thomas stated: "Obviously, if something surfaces in the ERs that is problematic for the youth, then it is clearly good to be able to address it, I believe. Get it out in the open, get some health assistance." Additionally, many career counselors recognized the importance of focusing on the purpose of using ERs in CCC, as emphasized by Christian: "This mapping out of ERs is meant to give an extra dimension to determine where to go next, and what occupies you."

Another domain where the career counselors felt that using ERs in CCC created new challenges is related to how ERs should be understood and used. Even if they were aware of not interpreting ERs, and only using the clients' words, several counselors stated that they felt a need for interpretation. For instance, Thomas said: "There is a huge responsibility resting on us. That we, when retelling what has been said, have interpreted it correctly." Nevertheless, several counselors emphasized that creating the life portrait should be a co-construction with the client like Christian put it: "You need to make the conclusions in cooperation with the client, which may make it less ethically challenging."

Overall, the career counselors experienced that employing ERs in CCC created new challenges and revealed different role understandings. Some proceeded cautiously because they found this bordering too much with therapy, while others believed that they should not fear talking about difficult themes in clients' lives and claimed that the purpose of using ERs in CCC is to discover new directions related to clients' career challenges. In addition, some experienced challenges related to not interpreting clients' stories, while others emphasized co-construction with the clients.

The need for training, relationship skills, and faith

This outcome dealt with the reflections of career counselors concerning the required competence to use ERs in CCC. All the career counselors confirmed the need for training (i.e., practical competence). During the first action research meeting, they described the intervention as complex, time-consuming,

and overwhelming. In the subsequent meetings, several career counselors mentioned that they found testing out CCC fun and exciting.

A competence highlighted by career counselors is the ability to build relationships and nurture trust: "I think that if you are good at building relationships, then you really have an advantage" (Christian). Another notable factor that career counselors indicated when using ERs in CCC was understanding the intervention and having faith in intentions behind the use of ERs. Mette put it this way when asked what she finds important when using it: "That I believe in it. I believe that much from your childhood will remain with you later in life." Hence, many career counselors suggested that a career counselor must be willing to use ERs and CCC, as expressed by Hilde: "You cannot tell your colleagues if you are the leader that 'now you will start using Life Design,' because this is something you really need to want yourself."

Besides, several career counselors conveyed that they were unable to perform exactly as Savickas intended and that they needed to find another way. In Mette's words: "We cannot become Savickas, you know. […] We are where we are in our lives, doing our thing. […] We must 'bake our own cookies.'" Similarly, several counselors emphasized the need for a professional community for career counselors who want to use CCC so they can discuss experiences and help each other move forward.

Hence, according to the career counselors, the most important competence was achieved through training and the ability to build relationships and ensure trust. The counselors experienced that they need to have faith in the intervention and that they must understand the purpose of using ERs in CCC and be willing to use it. Therefore, the career counselors deemed the opportunity to train and reflect together in a professional community incredibly useful. Additionally, they believed it was imperative to find a unique and personalized way of employing the intervention.

From skepticism to comprehension and interest

This last theme consists of the career counselors' development and reflections on using a new and different approach in Norwegian career counseling contexts. Several counselors suggested that Norwegians may be skeptical about things coming from the United States, and Kristin reflected on the different foundations of the career counseling discipline: "It is simply a clash of traditions."

Some of the career counselors explicitly stated how they had gone from skepticism to a positive comprehension and insight regarding both ERs and CCC: "A year ago, I was very skeptical. Now, I have really started to appreciate it" (Christian). Julie stated: "When you first talked about this a year ago, I had never heard about it before, so I thought 'Oh, well. We will see.' Now, I have much more, well, call it confidence and understanding." Additionally, in the plenary conversation on the final day, one of the groups relayed the value of being able to try the intervention and reflect on experiences with others: "The fact that we have tried it ourselves makes it more interesting and engaging. We understand things when we try them out."

Besides, the career counselors expressed that what had piqued their interest in this approach with ERs was that on an overarching level, and it contributed to holistic career counseling, which may help to accommodate the whole person, even clients with more complex challenges. Sara reflected:

> I also believe that it is ethically problematic when you work as a career counselor to think only in terms of profession and career. This part of life is never isolated from other aspects of life. I think that LDC really addresses this.

In summing up this theme, several career counselors experienced that learning and trying the intervention created a transition from being skeptical to being interested. Moreover, the participants found the approach to provide a more holistic career counseling that increases their ability to unravel the whole life of clients in a valuable way.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore career counselors' experiential reflections on using ERs in a CCC process. The findings are largely consistent with previous research on career counselors' general perspective of CCC as a helpful and positive intervention for clients (Rehfuss et al., 2011). Moreover, the analysis of career counselors' experiential reflections in the current study revealed that they perceived ERs as providing anchoring, completeness, and cohesion in the clients' lives, in line with previous client-oriented studies on ERs (Hartung & Vess, 2016; Maree, 2016a). The career counselors also experienced that their clients acquired a better understanding of themselves and their situation through ERs in CCC, which agrees with former research studies of clients' experiences of CCC in general (Cardoso et al., 2016; Di Fabio, 2016; Obi, 2015). Additionally, the findings reveal career counselors' relationship skills as advantageous when asking clients about ERs. This notion reflects the previously mentioned core competences in CCC (Savickas, 2019a) and studies on the relationship between career counselors and clients in a CCC process (Taveira et al., 2017).

However, this study's findings go further and provide new knowledge about career counselors' experiential reflections on different counselor challenges when using ERs in CCC, namely different role understandings and necessary competence. Some emphasized being career counselors and not therapists and expressed skepticism about potentially having to deal with clients' "withheld emotions," while others valued openness for whatever arose in the counseling session. Hence, these findings touch upon discussions about the relationship between feelings, mental health, and career counseling, which takes place both in relation to ERs and CCC (Cardoso et al., 2016; Sampaio et al., 2021) and beyond (Stoltz & Haas, 2016). According to Hartung (2011), emotions might be more essential in career counseling than recognized before because they permeate one's entire life and are firmly connected with motivation. Regarding CCC, emotions are an absolutely essential element of the intervention (Savickas, 2019b). Notably, McIlveen (2015) states that CCC requires special competence in the form of the ethic of critical reflexivity, which signifies career counselors' awareness concerning own psychological state. Therefore, the career counselors' different experiential challenges in this study regarding the use of ERs in CCC may imply different states of emotional awareness and reveal that the use of ERs in CCC leads to a stronger awareness of their own role understanding.

Hence, the findings of this study contribute to overarching discussions concerning career counselors' roles and necessary competences. Even though thorough competence standards have been presented both nationally (Bakke et al., 2020) and internationally (Schiersmann et al., 2016), recent research projects illuminate the need to further strengthen career counselors' social and emotional competences (Katsarov et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2021). Thus, this study's findings spark the need for a more conscious and comprehensive role of understanding, including the promotion of social and emotional competences (cf. Dalene, 2022), as this is pivotal to understanding and using ERs in narrative and constructivist interventions like CCC.

Additionally, the study's analysis suggests another challenge for career counselors when using ERs in CCC, namely, how to deal with clients' stories without making own interpretations, and instead being able to collaborate and co-construct the life portrait with the clients. According to McIlveen (2015), narrative counseling like CCC requires career counselors to be committed to the process and be willing to listen to clients' stories to collaborate on creating new knowledge. This may also be related to the findings showing that the counselors found it important to understand the purpose and have faith in using ERs in CCC and that career counselors cannot be coerced into using this intervention. According to the career counselors, they must want to and feel ready to practice both ERs and CCC, in line with Savickas (2019b). This also touches upon one of the visions of the Life Design International Research Group, namely the need for career counselors to "model narrating their stories and actualizing their identities through activities that have meaning and mattering" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 247).

Nevertheless, the most remarkable findings of this study seem to be about the change processes for the career counselors during action research. The findings convey that even if some of the career counselors originally perceived the intervention as comprehensive and overwhelming, they eventually experienced CCC as fun and exciting. This change underlines the importance of spending time and exercising patience when learning to use ERs in CCC. This contrasts the findings from the preliminary study, where career counselors' training in CCC was restricted to theoretical knowledge (Norendal, 2018). Referring to CCC as a different intervention due to ERs, the counselors in the current study experienced development from skepticism to understanding and interests. They explained this transition due to action research by using a combination of theoretical education and practical training, while also taking part in a professional community to share experiential reflections and discuss challenges, which eventually led to the development of insight, confidence, and comprehension when using ERs in CCC.

This alteration can also be explained by the value of experiential knowledge in the use of ERs in CCC and may be related to the extended epistemology of the action research design of this study (i.e., co-operative inquiry), which considers knowledge creation to constitute experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowledge (Heron & Reason, 2008). This outcome also appears to coincide with the existing training programs for CCC (McIlveen, 2015; Rehfuss, 2009).

Practical implications

In line with previous relevant research, the findings based on career counselors' experiential reflections suggest that the use of ERs in CCC provides an alternative and effective approach providing clients with anchoring, completeness, and cohesion in their lives that "goes straight to the heart of the current problem" (cf. Hilde). Thus, the use of ERs in CCC offers a valuable approach in career counseling that should not be overlooked by practitioners or training managers. Nevertheless, the findings suggest career counselors must not limit themselves to Savickas' modeling, however, to find their own way of employing ERs in CCC.

The findings regarding how career counselors' reflections on using ERs in CCC changed from skepticism and being overwhelmed to comprehension and excitement during this action research deserve special attention. The study demonstrates a need for more than theoretical training to be able to achieve a comprehensive understanding and insight in the purpose and value of ERs in CCC. Additionally, to be committed to the narrative process (McIlveen, 2015) and be able to "model narrating their stories and actualizing their identities" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 247), career counselors may need to simultaneously review their narratives, ideally by being counseled through CCC, which may result in a greater understanding of the intentions behind CCC in general and ERs in particular (cf. Stoltz et al., 2013). In other words, career counselors who want to use ERs in CCC could benefit from a *dual training process*—both being counseled themselves through CCC and undergoing thorough training to be able to counsel others with ERs in CCC.

Therefore, based on the findings of this study combined with previous research, training programs in ERs and CCC should ideally encompass (a) theoretical lectures, (b) being counseled through CCC, (c) practical training with other career counselors and with own clients, and (d) a professional community for sharing experiences and discussing challenges (cf. Heron & Reason, 2008). At the same time, the findings of this study indicate the importance of offering the abovementioned (b), (c), and (d) as voluntary training, conditioned by the need to be willing to use and have faith in the intentions behind the use of ERs.

Furthermore, career counselors' experiential reflections on using ERs in CCC reveal on an overarching level how career counselors may have different understandings related to both role and necessary competence. This indicates a need for raised awareness and engagement in competence and role understanding both for the individual practitioner and in training programs, specifically to evaluate the use of ERs in CCC and generally to increase consciousness about own role understanding. In training

institutions, this should include introduction to (a) overarching competence standards (Bakke et al., 2020; Schiersmann et al., 2016), (b) recent research and projects emphasizing the need for social and emotional competences (Katsarov et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2021), and (c) individual reflections and group discussions—to make the individual career counselors aware of their own understanding and arguments, whereupon they will also gain greater knowledge of which approaches they wish to adopt and whether they encompass interest for the use of ERs in CCC.

Limitations and future research directions

Although I have been aware of my preunderstandings, I acknowledge that it may have influenced career counselors in the action research and my analysis of the empirical data. The fact that the data have been examined by only one coder limits the findings; including the participants or other researchers in the analytical process might have identified different themes, highlighted other discussions, or reached other conclusions from the same empirical data. Besides, the selection criteria for the action research may have impacted the research findings. Despite some skepticism, it is reasonable to assume that the participants were more interested in CCC than the average career counselor in Norway. There were, however, no incentives such as awarded study points or employers requesting their participation, which could have led to bias in their experiential reflections in a positive direction.

Additionally, the action research had some dropouts among the career counselors due to issues pertaining to time or illness. Possibly, participation in action research was too time-consuming alongside full-time jobs, or the CCC intervention and work with ERs was personally demanding, or simply that "life happens." All 16 career counselors joined the initial focus group interviews (FG1); 10 took part in FG2, and eight took part in FG3. However, the 10 career counselors who participated in most of the research had diverse backgrounds and competences; therefore, the dropouts were not regarded as crucial to the research process. Additionally, several career counselors in this study deliberately chose clients they knew did not have too heavy a burden when trying out CCC, and this preference may have influenced their experience of using ERs.

Future research should provide a more holistic outlook of career counselors' experiences with ERs in CCC by ensuring that the choice of using CCC depends on clients' career challenges, and not the career counselor's need for security. This objective may require studies on career counselors with more experience in using CCC and ERs, or research conducted over protracted periods. This study suggests a *dual training process* for career counselors who want to use ERs in CCC; however, its utility value must be explored in future studies. Considering that there are countries without established certifications or training programs for CCC, more research is needed to clarify which decisive and necessary factors make training as effective as possible when using ERs in CCC. In this context, the employment of the Innovative Moments Model, which Cardoso et al. (2019) believe may offer new opportunities for promoting CCC practice, theory, and research, can be a useful approach related to this study's discussion on the training process of career counselors using ERs in CCC. Additionally, to further elaborate on clients' perspectives of ERs' value directly, future research should capture both career counselors' and clients' experiences and insights.

CONCLUSION

Career counselors' experiential reflections on the use of ERs in CCC in this study are in line with the limited previous research emphasizing ERs (Hartung & Vess, 2016; Maree, 2016a, 2016b), suggesting ERs' value in CCC to promote anchoring, wholeness, and cohesion in clients' lives. The research findings uncovered career counselors' different experiences of new challenges when using ERs in CCC, in terms of various understandings of their role and competences, as well as the role of emotions in career counseling. Thus, this study argues for raised awareness regarding role understanding and

considers the need for increased social and emotional competence, both related to the use of ERs in CCC and in general.

However, the findings highlight how some of the career counselors' experiential reflections on using ERs in CCC changed from skepticism and being overwhelmed to comprehension and excitement during the action research. This is explained by combining theoretical lecturing with practical training in using ERs in CCC with each other and with clients, as well as providing a professional community for sharing and discussing experiences and challenges. Additionally, the findings of the current study as well as research on narrative interventions in general suggest that for career counselors to fully comprehend the use of ERs in CCC, they may benefit from a *dual training process* that includes being counseled with ERs and CCC themselves, to narrate their own stories and obtain a thorough understanding of the intervention together with increased emotional awareness. Nevertheless, the utility value of dual training needs further research.

Furthermore, the study findings emphasize the need for practical training in the use of ERs in CCC to be voluntary, conditioned by the need to be willing to use and have faith in the intentions behind the use of ERs. However, the study suggests being inspired but not limited by Savickas' original procedure and modeling, and instead, career counselors should find their own way of employing ERs in CCC.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The action research was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), reference number: 60785. All participants signed informed consent forms, which also notified them that they could withdraw from the action research at any time. This article is performed as part of a PhD study at USN.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data used in this article are stored according to the guidelines that apply to USN and are not available to others.

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