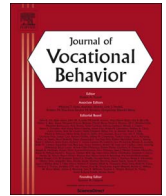


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# Finding voice through narrative storytelling: An exploration of the career development of young African females with refugee backgrounds<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the complex process of career development of young people with refugee backgrounds, who resettle in developed countries after experiencing prolonged migration journeys, is a contemporary priority at a time when the highest number of people in recorded history is in urgent need of resettlement. Moving towards anticipated futures and access to appropriate work could be challenging for these young people after resettlement, considering the effects of protracted displacement that might have silenced their agency. To propose new ways of assisting young people with refugee backgrounds with such challenges, further research that increases knowledge about their career development is needed. The current research aimed to enhance understandings of the career development of young people with refugee backgrounds through culturally and contextually sensitive exploration of their career stories. Using a qualitative exploratory multiple case study method informed by narrative inquiry, qualitative data were generated through interviews and analyzed using a voice-centred relational method. Each participant's unique career story reflected the operation of various voices, relationships, social structures and dominant narratives, influential in reshaping their future career plans. Findings revealed that narrative inquiry fostered rich storytelling for young people with refugee backgrounds. These findings suggest that narrative career counseling could assist them to re-contextualize their skills, strengths, knowledge and career plans after resettlement. Through such re-contextualization, voices that might have been lost or diminished during multiple transitions have space to re-emerge. This process may be a first step towards gaining a sense of agency that is needed for the actualization of preferred career plans.

## 1. Introduction

With nearly 1% of the world's population forcibly displaced for the first time in recorded history (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [UNHCR], 2016), millions of people are migrating to countries that hold the promise of a safe and fulfilling life. Young people with refugee backgrounds face a complex process of career development while resettling in developed countries (Schultheiss & Davis, 2015; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). The world of work in these resettlement countries is undergoing dramatic shifts with employment markets and educational systems significantly different from

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those that people with refugee backgrounds might be familiar with; thus access to meaningful and appropriate work is no longer assured (Blustein, Olle, Connors-Kellgren, & Diamonti, 2016; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). Successful integration of young people with refugee backgrounds in developed countries is linked to their career development (Abkhezr, McMahon, & Rossouw, 2015; Beadle, 2014).

More than 70% of those with refugee backgrounds resettled in developed countries are below the age of 30 (UNHCR, 2014) and are considered as youth in this article. These young people might need career development assistance. They come from diverse cultural, religious, linguistic, socio-economic, educational and career backgrounds, experience different migration journeys and therefore tell very different life stories. The career development of these young people is influenced by unique experiences during their childhood and adolescent years in contexts very different from that of their final countries of resettlement. Exploring their career development, prior to and across the stages of the migration journey is important for shaping a richer understanding about how they make career decisions after resettlement. Little research has been conducted on the career development of young people with refugee backgrounds after resettlement in developed countries. Career development, primarily underpinned by principles of social justice, multiculturalism, educating and intervening for social progress and change (McMahon, Arthur, & Collins, 2008; Stebleton & Eggerth, 2012), is now confronted with an important task in relation to the refugee crisis. As the number of people with refugee backgrounds continues to grow, further research is needed to better understand their career development in order to propose new ways of assisting them.

### 1.1. Young people with refugee backgrounds and finding voice

Many young people with refugee backgrounds have faced traumatic experiences such as torture, loss, rape, displacement and other uncommon experiences which have denied them opportunities to access and manifest their voices, leading to self-silencing and a sense of voicelessness (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003; Wessells, 2004). In addition, they have been through extensive and repetitive interviews focusing on detailed stories of fear, hopelessness, helplessness and trauma that have led to their refugee status (Amnesty International, 2013). The repetitive re-telling of such stories becomes a usual part of the complex internal and external experiences of young people throughout their migration journey. As a result of such re-tellings, certain voices may be ignored. Voice as a “polyphonic and complex channel of psychic expression” (Brown & Gilligan, 1993, p. 15), can be silenced, censored or lost. These youths might have never had an opportunity to story their career journey and therefore, their efforts, achievements, struggles and challenges for reconnecting with their skills and abilities might have never been voiced. Therefore, an exploration of their career development inevitably needs to involve a process of finding voices that might have been lost or silenced (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017). However, to do this, the heterogeneity of these young people must be acknowledged (Schultheiss & Davis, 2015).

New trends in the field of career development and a shift towards post-modern approaches that emphasize the context, culture and subjectivity of individuals (Duffy et al., 2016; McMahon, 2014; Savickas, 2012, 2013; Watson, 2017) seem to accommodate the heterogeneity of the population of young people with refugee backgrounds (Abkhezr et al., 2015; Hughes & Scott, 2013; Slowik, 2014). Researchers and practitioners have been cautioned about relying on theories and ways of practice that do not prioritize the subjective experiences of diverse populations (Watson, 2006). Instead, relying on approaches that provide a space for the exploration of various culturally and contextually shaped voices present in the lives of participants have been encouraged (Abkhezr et al., 2015).

Attending to the voices present in people's ways of storytelling (Brown & Gilligan, 1991) is an innovative approach to stepping away from traditional discourses that usually do not prioritize people's subjective career stories and experiences (Richardson, 2012). Such an approach could provide a space where youth with refugee backgrounds may narrate career stories and, through the experience of storytelling, find an opportunity to voice career plans, motivations and concerns for the first time. Exploring and raising sensitivity to the career development of young people with refugee backgrounds among researchers and practitioners is subject to the provision of such a space and finding lost and silenced voices which can be achieved using narrative approaches (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017; Maree, 2007; McMahon & Watson, 2013). Narrative approaches to career counseling honor people's subjective experiences, local and particular ways of narrating career stories and conceptualizations of work (Abkhezr et al., 2015; Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017; Blustein, Kozan, Connors-Kellgren, & Rand, 2015; Maree & Molepo, 2007; Slowik, 2014).

### 1.2. Narrative approaches, constructivism and social constructionism

A narrative approach to inquiry embedded within a constructivist, social constructionist framework informs the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research. Despite similarities, constructivism focuses more on internal cognitive processes by which every person makes meaning of experiences, while social constructionism considers the influence of wider contexts on how such cognitive processes evolve within the individual. Such assumptions in the field of career development claim that people's career preferences are shaped through internalizations of available cultural and contextual stories, resulting in a construction of an “evolving life story” (McAdams, 2001, p. 117). Therefore, career development exploration based on a constructivist and social constructionist epistemology involves “working with storytellers” (McMahon, 2017, p. 17). A narrative approach to exploration, and also to inquiry, provides an opportunity for storytellers to meaningfully deconstruct and connect aspects of their internalized, evolving life stories. Such deconstructions facilitate a better understanding of socializations that have been influential in the shaping of career plans and anticipations.

In career counseling, narrative approaches emphasize the facilitation of storytelling and collaboration between counselors and their clients towards exploring career stories that inform the career development of clients. Additionally, by deconstructing such

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