Psychological Assessment in South Africa

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The history of career assessment spans more than a century, with its origins in the early 1900s. It is a history that is recursively related to the development of career theory and practice. Thus the philosophy of career assessment reflects and informs the career psychology discipline of the times. The predominant approach to career practice through most of the last century was a directive, matching approach resulting from a focus on quantitative career assessment. There is also a long history to qualitative career assessment, but it is a history that has been subsumed by the dominant story of quantitative career assessment (McMahon, 2008; McMahon & Patton, 2006). The first part of this chapter provides an overview of quantitative career assessment and then introduces qualitative career assessment. The second part of the chapter focuses on a qualitative career assessment instrument that has been developed in South Africa, the My System of Career Influences (MSCI) reflection process, beginning with an introduction to its theoretical foundation, the Systems Theory Framework (STF) of career development.

Quantitative career testing

De Bruin and De Bruin (2006) make an important distinction between the words ‘testing’ and ‘assessment’. Psychological testing means just that – the administration, scoring and collating of tests, which in career counselling could involve abilities, interests, values and personality traits. Assessment, on the other hand, is a broader, more holistic concept which is inclusive of but not limited to psychological testing. Assessment reflects a process of giving meaning to information (psychometric or otherwise); it promotes greater career and self-exploration in a client. This section describes testing in career counselling, while the next section examines the role of assessment in career counselling.

Much of the history of career psychology has reflected on the dominant role of testing. There is general agreement that the dominant role of career testing evident internationally is similarly reflected at a national level. Lamprecht (2002, p.121), for instance, states that career counselling in South Africa has ‘over the last 50 years been dominated by the practice of standardised, psychometric tests’. Lamprecht argues that the trait-factor approach on which some of the more
popular careers tests are founded still remains the career counselling approach of most South African practitioners.

Historically, a trait-factor approach to career counselling (as well as its updated person–environment fit approach) reflects a logical-positivist world view which values objective data and measurement that allows the career counsellor to predict career choice (McMahon & Patton, 2006). Career testing encourages the gathering and interpretation of psychometric information at a point in time, thus limiting the possibility of a process approach to career counselling which would more actively involve the client.

While any psychometric test has the potential to be utilised in a qualitative way, as discussed later in this chapter, there is a range of career tests available in South Africa that provide scores and are predominantly used in a limited, quantitative manner by many career counsellors. These tests reflect diverse theoretical backgrounds. By far the most popular questionnaire is the Self-Directed Search (SDS) (Holland, 1985), which provides interest scores that enable a matching process between an individual’s interest profile and a corresponding work environment. This questionnaire is directly based on the original trait-factor approach to career counselling and its more recent derivative, person–environment fit. It has been adapted for use in South Africa (Bisschoff, 1993). Research on the use of the SDS in South Africa has been mixed. Nel (2006) provides a comprehensive description of such research and concludes that the SDS still maintains its preferred psychometric status in South Africa. More recently Watson, Foxcroft and Allen (2007) found that the SDS codes of working field guides did not match the codes ascribed to them in a South African dictionary of occupations.

Several career tests are based on Super’s (1990) career developmental approach. Three of these tests have been specifically adapted for use in South Africa: the Career Development Questionnaire (CDQ) (Langley, 1990); the Life Roles Inventory (LRI) (Langley, 1992); and the Values Scale (VS) (Langley, Du Toit & Herbst, 1992). The CDQ provides scores on self-information, decision-making skills, the gathering of career information, the integration of self- and career information, and career planning that reflect an individual’s state of readiness to make a career decision. Low scores would indicate the need for remediation of those aspects of career development. The LRI positions the role of work within other life roles and provides an assessment of an individual’s relative participation in, commitment to and value expectations of five life roles. As such, the LRI provides a more holistic perspective on the role of work in an individual’s life. The VS provides scores on 22 values that could relate to the work role, and provides individuals with the opportunity to rank the importance of such roles in relation to the meaning they would seek from the work role.

Other popular career tests are the Jung Personality Questionnaire (Du Toit, 1987), which has been standardised for use in South Africa, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). Both are personality questionnaires which encourage greater self-understanding in clients. They also allow for a matching process in which the client’s personality trait scores are compared with the scores of individuals working in the occupations in which the client has expressed interest.
Clearly, the popularity of these quantitative tests has been much evident over several decades in South Africa. Whether these tests have served us well would depend on how they have been incorporated into the career assessment process. De Bruin and De Bruin (2006) warn us not to hold stereotypical perceptions of standardised career tests in South Africa but, equally, such tests offer the great temptation of being utilised in stereotypical and limited ways. As De Bruin and De Bruin note, ‘[i]t is the uses to which they are put, and the manner in which this is done, that can be good or bad’ (p.130). Unfortunately a restricted, cost-effective (in terms of time and client expectations) use of most of these measures has led to consistent criticism of quantitative career tests in South Africa.

Lamprecht (2002) points to several concerns that have been raised about quantitative career assessment. There is the criticism that such tests portray a limited, less holistic view of the client’s life, reducing clients’ lives to scores concerning the working role only. Lamprecht argues that quantitative testing creates work identities for clients and little more. Related to this criticism is the increasing concern that contextual factors are insufficiently considered during quantitative career assessment, that clients are reduced to ‘psychometric selves’ (Lamprecht, 2002, p.124) and that the interpretation of quantitative scores is decontextualised. Another concern is that quantitative scores may lead to information overload in that a major part of the career counselling process is spent processing psychometric information, which may limit the potential for other activities to happen.

Qualitative career assessment

In recent decades there has been a movement in career psychology towards theories and practices informed by a constructivist world view, which places emphasis on individuals identifying their life themes and constructing their own career stories (see, for example, Amundson’s (2009) active engagement, Cochran’s (1997) narrative career counselling, Peavy’s (1998) SocioDynamic approach, Pryor and Bright’s (2011) chaos theory, and Savickas et al.’s (2009) life designing). This movement shifts the focus of career assessment from interpreting scores to reflecting on individuals’ stories (McMahon & Patton, 2002; Savickas, 1993). In essence, clients play a more active role in the career counselling process through interpreting their career assessment within the parameters of their life contexts, as well as through the resultant career stories that they tell. When considering the increasingly unpredictable and complex world of work in which individuals may make several career decisions and transitions, encouraging active participation by career clients is critical to encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their decisions and to learn processes and strategies that they may apply to subsequent decisions. McMahon and Patton (2006) suggest that career counselling is under pressure to be more interpretive, and for its assessment approaches to accommodate constant change both in society and in the workplace. Qualitative career assessment allows the career counselling process to reflect these macro-systemic challenges and, at the same time, to engage in what Blustein (2001, p.176) has termed ‘experience-near connections to clients’.
Qualitative career assessment is in itself a process, one that is more informal, less standardised and less reliant on scores than other assessment processes. It promotes self- and career exploration (De Bruin & De Bruin, 2006) and it encourages the client to explore the influence of not only intrapersonal factors but also external, systemic influences on personal career development, such as family, peer group, cultural context and societal-environmental barriers. The goal in qualitative career assessment is thus less on an end-process decision outcome and more on an exploration process and contextualisation that will lead to an effective career decision. With its emphasis on process, qualitative career assessment encourages a collaborative career counselling relationship between the career counsellor and the client. Thus clients assume a role of active agent in the career choice process, as compared to the more passive client role presented by traditional career testing, which enables them to experience and learn processes and approaches which they can apply to subsequent decisions.

The promotion of qualitative career assessment raises several philosophical issues about career assessment. One such issue is whether career assessment should be psychological or psychosocial in nature. Most career assessment in South Africa could be considered as psychological in its approach. However, Watson, Duarte and Glavin (2005) argue that career assessment should be psychosocial, that it should focus on assessing the relationship between individuals and the broader contextual factors that may influence their career development. A further issue is that of validation, with most career measures in South Africa validated in terms of the applicability of international measures in a variety of cultural contexts. Thus the focus has been on the construct, concurrent and predictive validation of quantitative career measures, rather than on the use of qualitative career assessment that explores career development within the cultural context in which an individual may be embedded (Watson et al., 2005). With qualitative career assessment, the issue of validity is, rather, defined by the appropriateness of the career assessment introduced into the career counselling process. Given that clients will be active partners in this qualitative career assessment, the issue of validity becomes mutually defined.

Common to most qualitative career assessment processes is their flexibility and usefulness with clients from diverse backgrounds (De Bruin & De Bruin, 2006). In addition, qualitative career assessment encourages a collaborative relationship between the client and the career counsellor, who jointly undertake and interpret the career assessment process. This process is continuous in nature, rather than a point-in-time intervention like quantitative career testing.

There are recognised limitations to qualitative career assessment, such as the fact that it can be time-consuming and labour-intensive. This form of assessment has also been criticised for its questionable validity and reliability. The issue of validity and reliability, however, needs to be understood in terms of the differing world views of quantitative and qualitative career testing and assessment. The cost-effectiveness of qualitative career assessment may need to be understood in relation to the shorter- and longer-term goals of the career assessment process. In the context of South Africa, cost-effectiveness is particularly pertinent in terms of both time and money. In addition, the public perception of the career counselling process is generally that it will be of a short and structured duration,
leading often to resistance on the part of both the career counsellor and the client to adopt a more exploratory approach. On the other hand, if the goal of career counselling is genuine exploration that will empower the client for the future, qualitative career assessment can nurture and stimulate such an exploratory process.

A wide variety of qualitative career assessment processes are available to career counsellors. Several of the more popular of these approaches will now be described. The first of these is **card sorts**, which is often used in qualitative career assessment and is possibly the best-known approach. Here clients have to sort out a pack of cards (relating to interests, values, aptitudes and personality traits) in terms of how important or not the cards are to their lives. This sorting may also be undertaken by significant others in the client’s life. Most card sets are grounded in theories of classification and in this regard, therefore, may not be truly qualitative. An example of a constructivist card sort is the Intelligent Career Card Sort® (Parker, 2006), which uses three sets of cards focusing on self-awareness, each set reflecting a way of knowing: knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom.

Reflecting its constructivist underpinnings, qualitative career assessment places great emphasis on story and narrative. A narrative approach may involve the writing of essays by clients about their lives. Essay-writing exercises may be unstructured or structured, and the career counsellor and the client will jointly analyse the essay for significant life themes. Stories may also be elicited through **unstructured interviews** and **life stories** (see, for example, Hartung, 2007), and Fritz and Beekman (2007) describe a process of **reflective journal writing** which could focus on a career or life transition.

**Collages** are frequently used in qualitative career assessment as they can provide clients with insight into their values, interests and personality traits. This qualitative assessment involves cutting out pictures from old magazines in order to illustrate themes, whether those as broad as how clients see themselves (for example, a collage titled ‘my strengths’) or more specifically structured themes such as what clients’ projected future could be. Fritz and Beekman (2007) suggest that a collage could also focus on themes such as ‘this is not me’ or ‘this is what I am good at’. Instead of pictures, clients can also be encouraged to choose personal artefacts that would help tell their story (Fritz & Beekman, 2007).

The use of **metaphor** in qualitative career assessment involves the choice of word images that reflect on clients in relation to their career developmental concerns. Lamprecht (2002) refers to this form of assessment as flights of the imagination. For a fuller description of the use of metaphor, the reader is referred to the extant literature (for example, McMahon, 2008). There are also qualitative assessment processes that allow clients to discover themes and patterns from different chapters of their lives – for example, the **genogram** and **timelines**.

Some qualitative career assessment approaches have been developed from specific career theory frameworks such as Peavy’s (1998) life-space map and Amundson’s (2009) pattern identification exercise. In the South African context, Maree, Bester, Lubbe and Beck (2001) argued a decade ago about the limitations and irrelevance of quantitative career assessment, and Maree (2009) has more
recently argued for the greater relevance of qualitative career assessment. The present chapter considers the development, application and research in South Africa of one such qualitative career assessment process, the MSCI (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2005a; 2005b). The MSCI operationalises the STF of career development (McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton & McMahon, 1999; 2006) and a brief description of this theoretical framework is provided in the following section of the chapter. Thereafter, the MSCI will be described and then an overview of research related to the MSCI will be presented.

The STF of career development

Part of a more recent movement in career theory that reflects a constructivist perspective of career development, the STF (McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton

Figure 32.1 The Systems Theory Framework of career development

& McMahon, 1999; 2006) provides a meta-theoretical framework which conceptualises individual career development within a broader system of contextual influences. Within its holistic framework, the STF conceptualises career development in terms of both content and process influences which can impact on an individual's career development. The STF locates the individual at the heart of a complex and dynamic system of interconnecting influences on career development. The content influences depict the complexity of career development, and the process influences depict its dynamic nature. The STF is portrayed in Figure 32.1.

The central circle in the diagram represents the individual system, within which are a range of intrapersonal influences such as gender, interests, age, abilities, personality factors and an individual's sexual orientation. Of particular importance in the South African context is the STF's consideration of the individual in context, rather than the individual in isolation. Thus the individual system is sited within larger contextual systems – that is, the social system and the environmental-societal system. Culture is not included as a specific influence, because it is regarded as a personal construct by individuals which is recursively connected to their context. The social system comprises the more immediate context within which the individual lives, and relates to social influences such as the family, educational institutions, peers and the media. Encompassing both the individual and the social systems is the macro context of the environmental-societal system, which includes macro-systemic influences such as geographical location, socio-economic circumstances, political decisions and globalisation.

The process influences of recursiveness, change over time and chance are illustrative of the dynamic nature of career development, as is evident in the interaction that can occur within and between the three systems of influence. The multidirectional and nonlinear interaction between influences, in which change in one part of the system results in change in another part of the system, demonstrates the concept of recursiveness (that is, interaction within and between influences). Recursiveness is represented in Figure 32.1 by dotted lines. The process influence of chance suggests that an individual's career development does not always proceed along predetermined paths. Thus, chance events such as accidents, illness or natural disasters may significantly influence career development. Superimposed on all content and process influences is the context of time. Time changes both the nature and the degree of influence. For example, family may be an influence across the life of an individual, but the nature of the family influence may be quite different in childhood, adolescence and as an older adult. Across time, the past influences the present, and together, past and present influence the future. For a fuller description of the STF, the reader is referred to the extant literature (for example, Patton & McMahon, 2006; Patton, McMahon & Watson, 2006).

The STF has been criticised for not offering in-depth accounts of the influences. However, as a meta-theoretical framework and not a theory, that is not the intention of the STF, as detailed accounts of some influences are found in the extant literature (for example, Holland (1985) provides a detailed account of interests). A strength of the STF is that it includes influences that may be pervasive in the
career development of individuals but that have received little or no attention in the extant literature. Such influences may be incorporated into the stories of clients engaged in practical applications of the STF, such as the MSCI.

The MSCI

The MSCI (McMahon et al., 2005a; 2005b) is a qualitative career assessment instrument developed from the STF. It provides individuals with the opportunity to reflect on their systems of influence in a step-by-step process. As a consequence of such reflection, individuals are able to create their own career stories (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2004) and gain a better understanding of the uniqueness, wholeness and interconnectedness of the influences on their career development. To date, an adolescent version (McMahon et al., 2005a; 2005b) has been published and a subsequent adult version has been developed (McMahon, Watson & Patton, in press a; in press b).

The MSCI (both the adolescent and adult versions) is a booklet of 12 pages, each of which contains brief information, a set of instructions, illustrative examples and the space for reflections to be recorded. The first section of the booklet guides individuals through a process of reflection on their present career situation in terms of their occupational aspirations, work experience, life roles, previous decision-making they may have made, and the support networks available to them. In the second section of the booklet, individuals are able to diagrammatically identify and prioritise their career influences, by thinking in turn about who they are (that is, the individual system of the STF), about the people around them (that is, the social system of the STF), about society and the environment (that is, the environmental-societal system of the STF), and about their past, present and future (that is, the context of time in the STF system).

Once individuals have completed a sequential exploration of their different systems of influence, they are provided with an opportunity to summarise their reflections of their identified influences on a page titled ‘representing my system of career influences’. The subsequent step is to present these reflections diagrammatically on a chart titled ‘my system of career influences’ which is, in essence, a personalised STF. The penultimate page of the booklet, titled ‘reflecting on my system of career influences’, provides individuals with the opportunity to reflect on the insights they may have gained through the whole guided process, resulting in their completing their action plan on the subsequent page. For a fuller description of the MSCI, the reader is referred to the extant literature (for example, McMahon et al., 2005a; 2005b). The MSCI is subject to the same criticisms directed more generally at qualitative career assessment that have been outlined earlier in this chapter. In particular, the MSCI does not generate ‘answers’ in the form of occupational titles or work environments that more predictive quantitative assessment may do. However, this is not its purpose; rather, its aim is to contextualise and present in story form individuals’ career decisions. A particular strength of the MSCI is that it may be used individually or in group settings such as classrooms and corporate career development programmes.
Researching the MSCI

Because quantitative and qualitative assessment are based on different premises, the parameters for validating the psychometric properties of quantitative career measures cannot be applied to qualitative career assessment measures. Thus a first step in the development of the MSCI was to develop rigorous guidelines for the development and evaluation of qualitative career assessment (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2003).

Development of the MSCI (Adolescent Version)
The adolescent version of the MSCI was developed over four years and involved a three-stage cross-national trialling process (McMahon et al., 2004; 2005a; 2005b; McMahon, Watson & Patton, 2005). Each subsequent stage involved refinement of the layout, the language and the instructions. Importantly, a trial with English-speaking South African adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and between the ages of 13 and 17 years indicated the need for an introductory process to familiarise the adolescents with systems thinking. Consequently a set of case studies was included in the Facilitators’ Manual, to enhance the MSCI learning process. Positive feedback was received on the Facilitators’ Manual and also on the supplementary career development learning activities provided in the manual, including the activity to introduce adolescents to systemic thinking. In summary, the three-year trialling of the MSCI suggested that adolescents can create their own meaningful stories through a reflective, qualitative career assessment process. It represents a meaningful learning experience that is ‘theoretically grounded, client oriented, holistic, sequential’ (McMahon et al., 2005a, p.40). In a further development, the MSCI has now been translated into the Chinese, Dutch, French and Icelandic languages.

Development of the MSCI (Adult Version)
A consequence of the trialling of the MSCI (Adolescent Version) was feedback calling for an adult version of the MSCI. Trials of a modified MSCI for adults (McMahon et al., in press a; in press b) were conducted internationally in Australia, South Africa and Great Britain, with feedback being provided both by facilitators as well as by adult participants in the three countries. Trials included males and females from trade, managerial and professional backgrounds, and from urban and rural locations and settings such as a large public sector organisation and small–medium enterprises. The results were overwhelmingly positive, with most participants indicating that the MSCI (Adult Version) was helpful to them and would be helpful to their friends. In terms of the South African trialling, participants indicated that the MSCI assessment process had increased their awareness of the diversity and critical importance of systemic influences in their lives, and provided them with the opportunity to ‘put things into perspective’. It challenged participants to confront and act on perspectives that they had gained. Facilitators’ feedback was positive. The South African facilitator commented on the usefulness of both the case studies in the Guide and the broader theoretical sections that conceptualised the nature of qualitative career assessment.
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Research and application of the MSCI

The usefulness of the MSCI as a qualitative career assessment tool has been demonstrated in several South African research projects to date (McMahon & Watson, 2006). For instance, McMahon, Watson, Foxcroft and Dullabh (2008) report on the career development of South African adolescents residing in a children’s home for a minimum of three years. This study examined the usefulness of the STF and the MSCI in understanding how contextual factors may impact on adolescent career development. The results indicated that the adolescents identified with all influences within the three systems of the STF and that parental influence was important in their career development. Other results indicated that working overseas was identified as an important influence.

The MSCI has also been researched in terms of both individual and group intervention. For instance, the MSCI has proved useful in enhancing the career development of middle-class South African high school students (Kuit, 2005). Kuit used the MSCI in a collaborative group approach in order to help adolescents elaborate their career narrative and find meaning in their personal career development. Similarly, in a case study approach, McMahon and Watson (2008) described the use of the MSCI in individual career counselling with a Grade 12 high school student which demonstrated how the client could take a more active role in the career counselling process, and how career decisions can be considered, re-evaluated and reprioritised more holistically within the broader context of an individual’s system of influences.

In a further case study, Watson and McMahon (2009) described the case of a 33-year-old English-speaking black South African higher education student with whom they made use of the MSCI (Adult Version). The case study illustrated how career counsellors can assist tertiary students to reflect on intrapersonal strengths and macro-systemic barriers and, in doing that, link their life stories to their career choices. This particular study was responding to persistent calls for the development of more qualitative career counselling models and assessment processes that would reflect the realities of counselling in a developing world context (Maree & Molepo, 2006; Watson, 2006).

Collett’s (2011) research on black South African adolescents and their parents of middle-class socio-economic status demonstrates an increasing acculturation in the adolescents’ perceptions of the systemic influences on their career development. The significance of Collett’s research focus cannot be overstated, as career psychology has been criticised internationally and within South Africa for its predominant focus on white middle-class samples (Watson, 2010).

The studies reported in this section of the chapter demonstrate qualitative research that attempts to meet the proposed goals for career psychology set out at the start of the previous decade (Savickas, 2001). Firstly, this body of research attempts to better interrelate research with practice, and to provide alternative methods of research through the use of the STF and the MSCI. Secondly, this research has focused on more disadvantaged populations through the use of an assessment process that can be regarded as locally as well as internationally grounded. The authors of this chapter are aware that the chapter emphasises a
minority qualitative perspective within a book that is predominantly quantitative in its content focus. It is to this issue that we turn in concluding the chapter.

Conclusion

There are several issues to consider in relation to the role of qualitative and quantitative career assessment. Lamprecht (2002) sees the two forms of testing and assessment as largely incompatible. Even when he suggests that they could be combined, he urges that the psychometric information should ‘not be regarded as the main sources of information’ (p.126). The position of the present chapter’s authors is that this is not an either/or situation, that we need to explore possibilities for the coexistence of quantitative and qualitative career assessment. As De Bruin and De Bruin (2006, p.130) have argued, ‘a comprehensive and collaborative approach to career assessment where both standardised psychological tests and qualitative career assessment procedures have a role to play, depending on the needs of the client’ is what is called for. Nevertheless, the present authors would argue further that quantitative career assessment needs to be qualitatively understood, that any assessment without contextualisation runs the risk of being limited in its interpretation. This is particularly the case when career assessment is undertaken in a developing world context with a diversity of cultural groups.

A second issue to consider is that the use of qualitative career assessment is not new. As indicated at the start of this chapter, it has a long but neglected history. Part of this neglect reflects the development of career psychology in more stable, measurable times. In a sense, increasing globalisation and the consequent changing nature of work calls for career practitioners to revisit the need for more qualitative career assessment. Thus, Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy and DeWine (2005, p.352) point out that qualitative career assessment is moving ‘from the margins into the center of contemporary inquiry’. While this may be true, there has been a lack of contextually relevant qualitative career assessment processes that are grounded in the local contexts in which they can be used. This chapter has explored the potential of qualitative career assessment to accommodate the less tangible and therefore less measurable variables that may influence individual career development.

This brings us to our final point: that this chapter has described to the reader an example of a qualitative approach to career assessment, the MSCI, which is sensitive to variables such as culture, socio-economic background, barriers to career development and other contextual influences that have been less focused on in quantitative career assessment. In addition, given the limitations discussed earlier, the MSCI’s capacity to be used in group and education settings suggests that it is a cost-effective approach to qualitative career assessment in South Africa. Such an approach would seem to be exceptionally relevant in the present context within which most South Africans live.
References


