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The Canadian Journal of Career Development was established by its late founding editor, Dr. Robert Shea, in 1999, with the inaugural issue being published in 2002. The objective of this peer-reviewed and open-access journal is to present articles on areas of career research and practice that are of interest to career development researchers and practitioners in Canada and internationally. The Journal is multi-sectoral, and includes a range of methodological, theoretical, and best practices articles.

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La Revue canadienne de développement de carrière a été créée par son rédacteur en chef fondateur, le Dr Robert Shea, en 1999, et le premier numéro a été publié en 2002. L'objectif de cette revue à comité de lecture et à accès libre est de présenter des articles sur les domaines de la recherche et de la pratique en développement de carrière qui intéressent les chercheurs et les praticiens en développement de carrière au Canada et à l'étranger. La revue est multisectorielle et comprend un éventail d'articles méthodologiques, théoriques et sur les meilleures pratiques.

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CANADIAN JOURNAL OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT | REVUE CANADIENNE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT DE CARRIÈRE

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK | DU BUREAU DE LA RÉDACTRICE EN CHEF

Dr. Jennifer Browne Editor/ Rédactrice en chef

As we open the January 2026 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Career Development* (CJCD), it is a fitting time to reflect on a year of meaningful progress and to look ahead with optimism and purpose. The past year has been one of growth, transition, and renewed commitment to strengthening the Journal's role in advancing career development research and practice in Canada and beyond.

Throughout 2025, several significant milestones were achieved. The Journal applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Aid to Scholarly Journals program, with funding results anticipated in March 2026. This application reflects both the maturity of the Journal and our continued efforts to ensure its sustainability and impact. We also successfully migrated the CJCD website and Open Journal Systems platform to Memorial University, a major undertaking that enhances stability, security, and long-term capacity.

Equally important has been the expansion of our peer-reviewer community. Increasing the number and diversity of reviewers strengthens the quality, rigour, and reach of the scholarship we publish. Work is also well underway on our re-application to the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), an important step in reinforcing the Journal's commitment to open, accessible, and high-quality research. In addition, we are in the final stages of establishing the Journal's inaugural Advisory Board—an exciting development that will provide strategic guidance as CJCD continues to evolve. These efforts have coincided with a welcome increase in submissions in 2025 compared to the previous year, a clear indication of the Journal's growing relevance and visibility in the field.

As we turn our attention to 2026, we do so in a global context marked by significant uncertainty, unrest, and rapid change. In such times, the work of career development practitioners, researchers, policy makers, governments, and educational institutions is more critical than ever. Ensuring access to current research, theory, emerging themes, and practical tools is essential to supporting individuals and communities in navigating complexity and realizing their full potential. CJCD remains committed to contributing to this collective effort by disseminating research that informs, challenges, and advances the field.

This issue offers a compelling glimpse into innovative and timely research in career development in Canada and internationally. Once again, the January issue aligns with the annual Cannexus Conference in Ottawa, Ontario—an extraordinary gathering that brings together stakeholders from

Alors que nous ouvrons le numéro de janvier 2026 de la Revue canadienne du développement de carrière (RCDC), le moment est venu de réfléchir à une année marquée par des progrès significatifs et de regarder vers l'avenir avec optimisme et détermination. L'année écoulée a été marquée par la croissance, la transition et un engagement renouvelé à renforcer le rôle de la revue dans la promotion de la recherche et de la pratique en matière de développement de carrière au Canada et au-delà.

Tout au long de l'année 2025, plusieurs étapes importantes ont été franchies. La revue a présenté une demande au programme d'aide aux revues savantes du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines (CRSH), dont les résultats devraient être connus en mars 2026. Cette demande reflète à la fois la maturité de la revue et nos efforts continus pour assurer sa pérennité et son impact. Nous avons également migré avec succès le site web du RCDC et la plateforme Open Journal Systems vers l'Université Memorial, une entreprise majeure qui améliore la stabilité, la sécurité et la capacité à long terme.

L'élargissement de notre communauté de pairs évaluateurs a été tout aussi important. L'augmentation du nombre et de la diversité des évaluateurs renforce la qualité, la rigueur et la portée des travaux universitaires que nous publions. Nous avons également bien avancé dans notre demande de réinscription au Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), une étape importante pour renforcer l'engagement de la revue en faveur d'une recherche ouverte, accessible et de haute qualité. En outre, nous sommes en phase finale de la mise en place du premier comité consultatif de la revue, une évolution passionnante qui fournira des orientations stratégiques à mesure que la RCDC continue de se développer. Ces efforts ont coïncidé avec une augmentation bienvenue du nombre de soumissions en 2025 par rapport à l'année précédente, ce qui témoigne clairement de la pertinence et de la visibilité croissantes de la revue dans ce domaine.

Alors que nous tournons notre attention vers 2026, nous le faisons dans un contexte mondial marqué par une grande incertitude, des troubles et des changements rapides. Dans une telle période, le travail des professionnels du développement de carrière, des chercheurs, des décideurs politiques, des gouvernements et des établissements d'enseignement est plus crucial que jamais. Il est essentiel de garantir l'accès aux recherches actuelles, aux théories, aux thèmes émergents et aux outils pratiques afin d'aider les individus et les communautés à naviguer dans la complexité et à réaliser leur plein potentiel. La RCDC

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK | DU BUREAU DE LA RÉDACTRICE EN CHEF

Dr. Jennifer Browne Editor/ Rédactrice en chef

every sector supporting career development from coast to coast to coast. The articles featured in this Issue address a wide range of topics, including gender and career pathways in digitally transforming service sectors; anxiety prevention and career decision-making among young people with autism; professional identity development among STEMM undergraduates; identity transitions from counsellor to counsellor educator; alternative doctoral pathways for pracademics; career wellbeing among racialized lawyers in Canadian law firms; decision-making frameworks for career practice; and vocational wellbeing among individuals navigating dual careers.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone who supports the *Canadian Journal of Career Development*: our authors and reviewers, CERIC, The Counselling Foundation of Canada, our incredible Associate Editor Diana Boyd, and the thousands of career professionals who read, cite, and engage with the Journal. CJCD would not exist without your ongoing commitment and collaboration.

As we look ahead to 2026 with hope and renewed energy, we remain focused on improving accessibility, reaching a wider audience, and refreshing the Journal's website to enhance the user experience. As always, I warmly invite you to reach out to me or to Associate Editor Diana Boyd to share ideas, offer feedback, or explore ways to engage further with the Journal.

Wishing you all a healthy, happy, and positive year ahead.

Jennifer Browne

reste déterminée à contribuer à cet effort collectif en diffusant des recherches qui éclairent, remettent en question et font progresser le domaine.

Ce numéro offre un aperçu fascinant des recherches innovantes et opportunes menées au Canada et à l'échelle internationale dans le domaine du développement de carrière. Une fois de plus, le numéro de janvier coïncide avec le congrès annuel Cannexus à Ottawa, en Ontario, un rassemblement extraordinaire qui réunit des intervenants de tous les secteurs soutenant le développement de carrière d'un océan à l'autre. Les articles présentés dans ce numéro abordent un large éventail de sujets, notamment le genre et les parcours professionnels dans les secteurs des services en pleine transformation numérique, la prévention de l'anxiété et la prise de décision professionnelle chez les jeunes autistes, le développement de l'identité professionnelle chez les étudiants de premier cycle en STIMM (sciences, technologie, ingénierie, mathématiques et médical), la transition identitaire de conseiller à formateur de conseillers, les parcours doctoraux alternatifs pour les praticiens universitaires, le bien-être professionnel des avocats racialisés dans les cabinets d'avocats canadiens, les cadres décisionnels pour la pratique professionnelle et le bien-être professionnel des personnes menant une double carrière.

Je tiens à remercier sincèrement toutes les personnes qui soutiennent la Revue canadienne de développement de carrière : nos auteurs et réviseurs, le CERIC, la Fondation canadienne du counseling, notre incroyable rédactrice en chef adjointe Diana Boyd, ainsi que les milliers de professionnels de l›orientation qui lisent, citent et interagissent avec la revue. La RCDC n'existerait pas sans votre engagement et votre collaboration continus.

Alors que nous envisageons l'année 2026 avec espoir et une énergie renouvelée, nous continuons à nous concentrer sur l'amélioration de l'accessibilité, l'élargissement de notre audience et la refonte du site web de la revue afin d'améliorer l'expérience utilisateur. Comme toujours, je vous invite chaleureusement à me contacter ou à contacter la rédactrice en chef adjointe, Diana Boyd, pour partager vos idées, nous faire part de vos commentaires ou explorer les moyens de vous impliquer davantage dans la revue.

Je vous souhaite à tous une année pleine de santé, de bonheur et d'optimisme.

Jennifer Browne

How do Gender Issues Mark the Career Paths of Canadian Service Sector Employees in a Digital Transformation Context

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Abstract

This paper aims to advance a better understanding of the digital transformation (DT) experience through employees building their career paths in a DT world. The study is based on a qualitative research methodology using one-on-one interviews with 44 employees of private companies in the Canadian insurance industry. Findings reveal a variety of entryways to first positions in this industry as well as gendered involvement in DT projects which can result in being either barriers or levers for career pathing. The present paper contributes to broaden the understanding of women's career paths in a DT context by making gender-related issues visible.

Keywords: life course, digital transformation, employees, gender

Authors Note: Funding for this research study was provided by the Centre des compétences futures/Future Skills Centre (CCF/FSC).

In recent years, digital transformation (DT) (Cafley et al., 2020), which consists of foundational change resulting from the integration of digital tools and its effect on the nature and processes of work (Selimovic et al., 2021), has attracted the interests of scholars and professionals alike (Cafley et al., 2020; Giguère et al., 2024; Nordin et Mathew, 2024; Selimovic et al., 2021). Some have highlighted the ubiquity of digital technologies not only in the workplace (Nordin et Mathew, 2024), but also in everyday life (Côté, 2022). Others have stressed the need for digital skills development from a lifelong learning perspective (Gamberini et Pluchino, 2024; Nordin et Mathew, 2024). Certain scholars have observed that DT can lead to new forms of work organization, involving technologies that necessitate new standards, rules and work practices for male and female employees alike (Nordin et Mathew, 2024; Pouyaud et Angel, 2023). DT can modify employee work tasks, training paths, skills acquisition and development, particularly for those working in the service sector (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021; Vayre, 2019; Wiggberg et al., 2022).

In the service sector and more specifically in the insurance industry, the use of digital tools such as AI (artificial intelligence), machine learning or even big data enables businesses to optimize the customer experience and assist employees in performing their different tasks, such as making better decisions (Kumar et al., 2019). Some insurance companies are now using AI and robot software to automate part if not all of work tasks, for example chatbots providing virtual assistance with claims processing (Kumar et al., 2019). According to Ceylan (2022), technical innovations in the insurance industry essentially lie in automating claims management, fraud detection, accident prevention and improving customer service. Although some studies have warned against the more technical challenges in implementing technological tools such as strict regulations, fraudulent use, complexity or misuse (Ceylan, 2022; Lamberton et al., 2017), the more latent question of how customer service and administrative employees in the Canadian insurance industry experience DT as they build their career paths seems to be overlooked or underexplored in this field of scholarship. In fact, although the ramifications of DT are of interest to many researchers (Côté, 2022; Gamberini et Pluchino, 2024; Maree, 2024; Pouyaud et Angel, 2023) and some have pointed out the relevance of investigating the influence it wields over career challenges (Maree, 2024), very few have examined the issues experienced in a DT context by male and female workers alike through the lens of gender.

In this regard, a number of studies skip over the relationship between gender issues and DT (Ceylan, 2022; Kumar et al., 2019; Lamberton et al., 2017; Maree, 2024; Nordin et Mathew, 2024). Yet a few peripheral issues related to gender (e.g., the impact of teleworking on the boundaries between different life spheres) in relation to DT (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021) and gender as a variable to differentiate men from women (Niraula et Kautish, 2019; Vaton, 2015) have been considered in other studies. Some research has also

evidenced a need for continued vigilance to prevent gender discrimination, which can take a toll on not only women's careers, but also on their education, training and eligibility for promotion (Chen et al., 2021), making the case for how the use of digital technologies in the workplace can boost women's career advancement. Lastly, with technology in the DT age several authors have cautioned of men once again taking the wheel, given the body of work—notably in the field of sociology—that exposes persistent gender inequality when it comes to technology (Rivoal, 2020). In light of this scholarship, it can be inferred that scant few studies have focused on the subject of DT and gender issues in the workplace, which also echoes findings by Hirata et Kergoat (1988). With these perspectives in mind, the present article intends to answer the following question: How do customer service and administrative employees in Canadian insurance companies–the majority of whom are women–experience digital transformation, more specifically in relation to building their career paths? In the following section we begin with a brief overview of what literature has to say about DT and gender issues.

Current Literature on Digital Transformation and Gender Issues

Firstly, literature on DT and gender remains divided: some studies evidence the risks of DT reproducing gender inequality (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021; Rivoal, 2020) although others highlight it doing exactly the opposite (Chen et al., 2021; Vaton, 2015). On the reproduction side (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021; Rivoal, 2020), scholars note, among others, the right to disconnect, borne by the use of digital tools in highly-connected work environments and remote work, which blurs the line between personal and work spheres (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021). In most of these cases, as managing the right to disconnect is left to employees, the latter find themselves having to contend with personal factors and barriers, e.g. family circumstances or having young children (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021). Additionally, as women are most often the first contacted in family emergencies, they are more likely to keep their cell phones handy at all times, even during work meetings (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021).

In the area of remote work, gender issues tend to be seen in their differentiated use: men are likely to devote their break time for doing things outside the home, although women use it for household chores (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021). These studies also argue that maintaining this gendered division of labour, coupled with a redefinition of roles consistent with institutionalized masculine dominance (Rivoal, 2020) can act as a barrier to career mobility for women (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021; Rivoal, 2020). For example, Rivoal (2020) spotlights entry-level jobs, mainly held by women, that require fewer qualifications and being less technologically savvy. In the insurance industry, these jobs are typically found in customer service and in the implementation of new technologies to automate these tasks (Ceylan, 2022; Kumar et al., 2019; Lamberton et al., 2017; Niraula et Kautish, 2019). Conversely, other research studies highlight factors in a DT context that can facilitate women's careers and potentially reduce gender inequality and stereotypes (Chen et al., 2021; Vaton, 2015). They also posit that DT is enabling a growing number of women to reach higher rungs of the corporate ladder (Chen et al., 2021; Vaton, 2015).

Considering the divergent perspectives advanced by these studies, it would appear useful to deepen our understanding of how customer service and administrative employees working in the Canadian insurance industry—the majority of whom are women—experience digital transformation as they build their career paths. Specifically, the aim of this article is to answer the following question: How do customer service and administrative employees in Canadian insurance companies–the majority of whom are women–experience digital transformation, more specifically in relation to building their career paths? In doing so, this article will thus help answer the call by Maree (2024) on the need for and importance of studying DT's influence on career-related issues. To do so, the present article draws on Fournier's career path analysis applied to the field of guidance and counselling (Fournier et al., 2016). In addition, as the research question addressed both male and female employees, it appeared appropriate to integrate materialist feminism perspectives in the sociology of gender to identify aspects of experiences and gender issues among employees that play a part in developing their career paths. The next section is devoted to these theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Frameworks

Career Path Analysis in the Field of Guidance and Counselling

Career path analysis in the field of guidance and counselling examines significant events in the working lives of individuals by considering the interactions between intersecting spheres of their life in a "diachronic avenue", looking at past, present, future (Fournier et al., 2016). This theoretical framework rests on several postulates: the sociology of life courses (Lalive d'Epinay et al., 2005), labour market transformations and their impact on these life courses (Lalive d'Epinay et al., 2005) and constructivist approaches and the systems theory of career development (Savickas et al., 2010). All these perspectives consider the lived experiences of individuals as they interact with their environment over a continuum of time (Fournier et al., 2017; Fournier et al., 2016), making this a particularly well-suited approach for identifying and analyzing the lived experiences of employees in a DT context. The concept of experience refers to the experimenting and exploring of the world by the individual (Jodelet, 2006) across a spectrum of situations and events at a given moment in time (Craig, 2008). The content of the lived experience also encompasses what is experienced, that is, the effects engendered and produced by the experience for the individual (Jodelet, 2006). Thus, in our study, experiences are related to the paths of its participants, so that these experiences can be manifold and diversified.

Feminist Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Work

To identify gender issues prevailing in a DT context, it would be fitting to first define the concept of gender. This can refer to myriad definitions, for example gender socialization processes and social differentiation between men and women, particularly in the labour market (Renzetti et al., 2012). An abundance of literature in this area exposes persistent gender inequality between groups of men and women, particularly in pay gaps or gendered stereotypes in occupational categories (Cardu et Costalat-Founeau, 2015). The perspectives noteworthy for our study are those related to materialist feminism, as they allow us to simultaneously consider the processes of socialization and hierarchy at play between the male group and the female group in the workplace. These studies expand the consideration of issues related to the gendered division of labour, waged work and unpaid housework, productive and reproductive, etc. revealing the exploitation of the female group when it comes to work (Galerand et Kergoat, 2017; Giguère et al., 2022; St-Arnaud et Giguère, 2018). On this subject, household chores, which for the most part continue to be done by women given social expectations are still not regarded as work (separation) and have little or no currency (hierarchy) (Delphy, 1970; Kergoat, 2012). Similarly, activities related to the home reflect the antiquated notion of a woman's role and remain invisible from the work environment, exposing dominant power relations in terms of work and issues in the gendered division of labour (Delphy, 1970; Giguère et al., 2022; Kergoat, 2012). This means that when women enter so-called "paid work" they often experience a continuity between all their activities although for men, this is often indivisible, with a cut-off between employment and private life (Kergoat, 2012). These gender issues, which manifest themselves notably through workplace processes of separation and hierarchization, fall more broadly under the social power relations between men and women. On a larger scale, gendered social relations intersect with other power relations in the workplace—notably those of race and class—which opens up their consubstantiality in a dynamic, interwoven and shifting understanding in the struggle for emancipation (Galerand et Kergoat, 2014; Galerand et Kergoat, 2017). Including gender issues thus appears to be a must if we wish to sharpen the focus on understanding the lived experiences of employees in the insurance sector and the way these experiences play a role in building their careers in the DT context.

Methodology

Our research is based on an analysis of data produced as part of an action-research program (Bourassa, 2015) carried out with three insurance companies based in Canada. The main objective was to gain an understanding of digital transformation (DT) in this business sector, and more specifically for customer

service and administrative employees. Working with the research project's steering committee, these types of occupations were chosen in particular because of their greater vulnerability (due to the low level of education required), or because their lower-skilled tasks are more susceptible to automation in the DT process. Also, at the time of the research project, these occupations were held mainly by women in the organizations, prompting us to frame the research question as follows: How do customer service and administrative employees in Canadian insurance companies–the majority of whom are women–experience digital transformation, more specifically in relation to building their career paths? This research coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected both the subject studied (notably in the new normal of mandatory remote work) and the study methodology (for example, carrying out one-on-one interviews online).

Research Strategy, Recruitment and Participants

Consistent with constructivist approaches and career path analysis in the field of guidance and counselling, our research study used a qualitative data collection methodology. To dive deeper into experiences in a DT context, we conducted one-on-one interviews (Merriam et Tisdell, 2016) online in Microsoft Teams with employees from Canadian insurance companies, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes.

An interview guide was created starting with background information, interview instructions as well as a description of the main topics to be covered, i.e., participant education and job history, work experiences in DT, and the challenges of balancing work with different aspects of life. To form a purposive sample (Fortin et Gagnon, 2022), participants were recruited during the fall of 2021 through winter 2022 with the help of contacts at the three insurance organizations partnering in this research project. A final round of participants was recruited by a team of colleagues using the quantitative survey filled out during the previous phase of the study. Participants had been asked to indicate whether they could be contacted for subsequent phases of our study. We were then able to reach out to people who were available and wished to voluntarily take part in the online interviews and e-mail them a recruitment information sheet approved by the Ethics Committee in our institution. Two eligibility criteria were applied: 1) being an employee in a private insurance company (project partners), and 2) having been employed there for at least two years. Those interested in being interviewed one-on-one met with one of the research team members at an agreed-upon time and signed a consent form that included permission to record the interview.

A total of 44 employees (35 women and 9 men) were selected, based on socio-demographic criteria to diversify the sample pool: for example, the company partnering in the project, type of position, family status and conjugal situation.

Data Processing and Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and their content anonymized: pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' real names and place names were indicated by "X" with a brief description in brackets. To ensure job titles remained confidential, three categories were created: 1) the "office" group (e.g., clerk, assistant, secretary); 2) the "professional" group (e.g., adjuster, broker, analyst, trainer, underwriter, advisor); and 3) the "management" group (e.g.; supervisor, assistant director, manager). Lastly, the interviews were conducted in an iterative manner to progressively process and analyze the material as it was being gathered (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016).

Data processing was carried out using a phenomenological review of the interview material, followed by an analysis using conceptualizing categories (Paillé et Muchielli, 2016). In the phenomenological review, a careful reading of the interviews was done maintaining a sensitivity to the material captured in the transcripts. Through this process it was possible to glean a variety of job positions and life events that shaped the life courses of the participants. The analysis was grounded in conceptualizing categories (Paillé et Muchielli, 2016) to grasp and abstract elements employees mentioned about their own life courses by always keeping the DT context top of mind. Starting from target elements in the verbatim transcripts and the theoretical frameworks, dynamic processes allowed us to create links and categories. Some of the categories were created using a descriptive analysis, grouping phenomena by drawing directly from the interview material (Paillé et Muchielli,

2016). Others were abstracted by induction, that is, paying attention to the sequence of experiences mentioned by the participants (Paillé et Muchielli, 2016). Lastly, theoretical frameworks were harnessed using interpretive deduction to connect the data collected in what is known as the scaffolding technique (Paillé et Muchielli, 2016).

Results and Discussion

This section will discuss the results that emerged from the data processing and analysis of the material distilled from the interviews with 44 participants in a qualitative study strategy. These results can be grouped in two broad categories: the first comprises entryways to a service sector job in the insurance industry, subdivided into two sub-categories: 1) following diversified experiences and 2) following a training program. The second category covers gender issues related to access to and involvement in DT projects, also made up of two sub-categories: 1) unequal means of accessing DT projects and 2) gender issues related to different forms of participation in DT projects: are they barriers or levers in their career paths? Table 1 below summarizes these categories and sub-categories.

Table 1

Summary of Results: Categories

Categories	Sub-categories
Entryways to a service sector position in the insurance industry	• Following diversified experiences • Following a training program
Gender issues related to access to and involvement in DT projects	• Unequal means of accessing DT projects • Gender issues related to the different forms of involvement in DT projects: barriers or levers in career paths

Entryways to a Service Sector Position in the Insurance Industry

A variety of work, education and personal experiences lead employees to land their first job with an insurance company. Two possible entryways—following diversified experiences (education, work, family, personal) or following a training program— are discussed below.

Following Diversified Experiences (Education, Work, Family, Personal)

Several of the female and some of the male participants entered a temporary or permanent position in the "office" or "professional" groups in the insurance industry after a series or accumulation of education, work or personal experiences. We found a wide range of these entryways: Some explained that they had immigrated to Canada, and this brought them to a position in the "office" group. For others, it was losing or quitting a job that compelled them to take a position in this group. Those on more advanced career paths, following a succession of work experiences and personal circumstances, went for finance, insurance and administration positions. For example, some participants said they had worked in a professional capacity in jobs in the field service industry, e.g., health care or social service. Others built their career holding different professional or management roles in sales, commerce or services. From the outset it was possible to establish that the female participants with diversified experiences entered the industry with wealth of proficiency as technicians, professionals or managers—yet were only hired for "office" jobs in their companies, which was hardly the case for a handful of male participants. This raises the issue of gender and much larger questions concerning the recognition and currency of women's skills in the recruitment process.

> I had worked for many years in an office in sales, commerce and services, and after that as a manager (…) I reached a point where I wanted to go back to school (…) I had a chance to start in insurance to do X [names the task (office group)]. — Julia

One of the possible reasons that seems to have encouraged participants to apply for and accept a position in the insurance industry was word of mouth, either from an acquaintance or family member who has already worked in the industry and who told them about an opening in their company. Beyond word of mouth, one of the other reasons that stood out for the female participants was maintaining a work/family balance, in particular job stability and security when returning to work after the birth of a child, separation or divorce, or a transfer following a partner's promotion, reasons that were barely mentioned by the male participants.

> I knew zilch about X [names field in the finance, insurance, and administration sector] and I thought I needed a change in direction anyway for personal reasons… work hours being one. I saw it [the job] and I thought "So, good then, I'm qualified for that, and it doesn't require any other training, this can be my foot in the door." (…) It was impossible for both of us to be working evenings, nights and weekends, we needed some sort of stable schedule at least (…) And after that, actually, a lot of things happened, I got separated… the children's father couldn't take care of them anymore and for many months I had them all to myself and had to take care of them. — Joëlle

In sum, although their education and work history may have not necessarily been related to the fields of finance, insurance and administration, some employees said their previous work experience ultimately proved useful in customer service, their interpersonal (communication, listening, attentiveness and adaptability to the customer), organizational and structural skills proving to be assets in the insurance industry.

> I'm totally out of my comfort zone in my job in general. The one thing that I know really well is customer service, and my gut feeling is to always serve the customer. You know, having sold X [names product], the service has to be A+! The client is not just coming to buy a X [names product], he's here to buy an experience. — Ines

In general, entries that follow a series of experiences (education, work, family, personal) can be aligned with the principle of an event shaping the sociological perspectives of life courses that relate to abrupt changes altering a participant's path (Lalive d'Epinay et al., 2005). Similarly, our results of entries following diversified experiences parallel the findings of Fournier et al. (2017) on the succession of work and personal events that can shape career mobility. The employees we interviewed (both women and men) appear to be proactive and engaged in building their work life, as suggested by Heinz's study (2003) (cited in Fournier et al., 2017). Lastly, some of the events mentioned by the female participants that fall into the category of balancing work with family (e.g., separation or divorce) are consistent with materialist feminism perspectives (Delphy, 1970; Kergoat, 2012) as they foreground the investment of female employees in household work, child caregiving and the impact this has on them, specifically choosing to work in the insurance industry, for its stability and being able to ensure a certain degree of continuity between the different spheres of their life. More broadly, these results echo other evidence on work/family balance in the life courses of female workers, particularly managers (Giguère et al., 2021).

Following a Training Program

Whether in a temporary or permanent position in the "office" or "professional" groups, some employees (several of the men and a few of the women) got hired after completing an initial training program, typically in finance, insurance and administration; but also, in other fields such as health care; education; sports and leisure; social services; arts and culture; sales or commerce.

> In Cégep I studied X [mentions program in finance, insurance and administration] because I was then preparing myself to become a/an X [names profession in the finance, insurance and administration field]. — Simon

These results show that entries following a training program are largely aligned with the more linear concepts of building life courses characterized by a school-to-work transition (Masdonati et Zittoun, 2012). Several reasons may explain participants choosing a job in the insurance industry: an interest in insurance, finance or administration, landing a well-paying job without necessarily having to spend many long years studying, the perspective of good rate of job placement in the field, the possibility of reconciling work and personal projects thanks to the stable working hours (typically a standard work week) and job security. In addition, among those employees who entered the insurance industry after their studies, some were hired by an organization following an internship or were recruited although still in their program. Several participants mentioned having to balance part-time or temporary job although studying.

> I completed my BA in X [names position in the field of finance, insurance and administration] (…) I had moved precisely to do my studies, well, I was X [names position in the field of sales, commerce and services] and all that. After that, I decided to find a job specifically so that I could work while studying, seeing that I was able do it with X [mentions company], I got in part time. — Mathieu

In addition, some female participants explained that as soon as they entered their first job, they had to start juggling school, work and family, compounded by the arrival of children or having family members to support, something rarely mentioned by the male participants. More broadly, the challenges of squaring an education plan with work and family are consistent with other research that shows these predicaments are also being experienced by other women, including those in management positions (Giguère et al., 2021) and women nurses (Dodeler et Tremblay, 2014).

Gender Issues Related to Access to and Involvement in DT Projects

Data processing and analysis of the interview material produced two subcategories that define gender issues influencing employee career paths in a DT context: Unequal means of accessing DT projects and gender issues related to the different forms of involvement in DT projects.

Unequal Means of Accessing DT Projects

Means of accessing DT projects can vary between work environments and even within the same organization. Firstly, recruitment communication methods for such projects are by no means homogenous. Some participants said they were notified about DT projects through internal e-mail, the company's Intranet or web portal, although others heard about it in person from their manager, either one-on-one—a personal recommendation advising why the employee should participate—or in team meetings. "I was asked [by the managers] to get involved in IT projects: to do some testing." — Simon

A similar inequality was observed in the selection processes to take part in DT projects: some participants said they had to formally apply to be considered; others mentioned doing this on their own initiative by either sending an e-mail or talking to their superior. Lastly, others had been asked directly and picked personally by their manager.

> First the mass e-mails are sent out, then they make a selection of the people who've shown an interest in participating in these projects. Sometimes they'll come to you in person and say: "I thought of you for this; would you be interested?" Other times, it's more of a general announcement: "Well, this is available; who would like to participate?" and then a selection is made. — Bianca

Gender Issues Related to the Different Forms of Involvement in DT Projects: Barriers or Levers in Career Paths?

For employees, the different forms of participating in a DT project can bring gender issues into play. The first is to act as a team representative in communicating needs related to performing work tasks altered by DT tools. Both male and female participants in our study spoke of having been involved in this role, which essentially consists of participating in *ad hoc* meetings and/or activities peripheral to the transformation, e.g., giving their opinions on the visual component or certain functions of the tool at hand. Typically done in addition to their job description, this form of participation can produce work overload.

In discussing their involvement as team representatives in a given DT project, some participants cited the pressures this created for them, for example project tasks piled on top of their daily work duties rather than getting a temporary release from these duties to perform them. In such cases, getting involved in DT projects is likely to increase their workload. Also, their involvement in and skills related to the work for the project had neither been recognized nor considered as added value or relevant enough to help them get a promotion. In fact, some said that it stalled the progress of their career and, in some cases, were turned down for a higher position. It can be inferred here that gender issues played a part in this, given that it was female participants who most often noted the possible barriers affecting their careers after having participated in a DT project.

> It's a new IT system (…) I worked on Project X [names project] to put it a bit on the map (…) but the restructuring had its drawbacks too, because I had a lot more pressure and I'd been in that position for [X] years [gives a number, a few years], then I'd have to prove that I deserved that job [laughs] (…) had to show that I knew how to do my job, that I was good, that I was proactive and all that (…) and I didn't move up. — Marika

For other participants, primarily men, their participation in DT projects consisted in collaborating on the design of digital tools alongside the developers creating them. The duration of their involvement spanned anywhere from a few months to a few years, with many switching positions temporarily or being released from their former duties.

Those male employees who collaborated in developing digital tools saw their participation grow in currency and recognized more, acting as a lever for their career paths. In fact, accessing and getting involved in DT projects appear to be one of the means with which employees can further their knowledge of DT, develop new digital skills (e.g., using applications and programs on different devices, independently seeking solutions, quickly searching, managing and processing data), and to collaborate and have their contributions seen. In this way, the possibility of gaining independence and living meaningful work experiences opens up possibilities of emancipation through work. As a corollary, these new technological skills acquired by those employees who worked on project development prepare them to perform more efficiently once the DT changes are integrated into the organization; in the meantime, their co-workers will need to struggle through the various stages of adaptation, with or without training. Moreover, the former, because of their greater DT knowledge and skills, became the resource person for the latter and were released from their former duties.

> I was no longer taking customer calls; I was completely tasked with this project full time. And since I've been back, given that it's me and Julien [pseudonym] who trained the people, well, when people have questions, who do you think they go ask? — Olivier

Some employees noted that their collaboration in the project design had helped them advance their career. They were offered new positions—mainly as trainers—or got promoted to a professional or managerial position.

> Me and Julien [pseudonym], a co-worker of mine, we were part of a project to configure the new system (…) Julien is now Director and my new boss (…) I'd like to be Director myself and have my own team, so I spoke to him about my aspirations and mentioned it… very, very, very candidly and very graciously he

said: "We're going to help you with your advancement so that it can be as solid as possible when the time comes." — Olivier

The results of our study show that on the one hand, unequal access to and forms of involvement in DT projects can generate inequality among female employees, and on the other, gender issues related to the different forms of involvement in projects can either limit or promote their career advancement. More broadly, these findings help to nuance Wiggberg et al. (2022)'s work on the importance of motivation to learn and push the boundaries of development as now being a competence essential to employability, by opening up new contexts that can foster or hinder skills development. Although digital skills are well beyond the basic knowledge needed to communicate and function in today's society (Wiggberg et al., 2022), it is important to consider contextual elements that can either promote or hinder workplace skills and career paths, of which access to and involvement in digital transformation projects are part.

Our findings reveal the presence of gender issues in how male and female employees develop their careers after accessing or getting involved in a DT project. Overall, it seems that more often, the women's group is confronted with forms of involvement in DT projects as well as cases that led to work overload, intensification and a lack of recognition, raising questions about the emancipation possibilities offered by DT. Our work also reveals that the involvement of the men's group in DT projects enables it to gain independence and experience meaningful work experiences opening up possibilities of emancipation through work. Similarly, our results converge with the work of Wiggberg (2022) who posits that information technologies are a male-dominated field and that the purpose of understanding and acquiring digital skills continues to this day to be led and shaped by men. Rivoal (2020) posits that DT on factory floors should make higher positions requiring physical strength—hitherto the purview of men—more accessible for female workers. With physical strength no longer being reason enough to justify the division of labour along gender lines because of DT, male workers have now positioned themselves in key technical roles by appropriating digital knowhow, defining it as inherently male, and passing on this knowledge and expertise among men, thereby operating a male monopoly and deepening gendered fault lines at the same time. In light of our findings, we thus need to ask: How can insurance companies make recruitment and selection processes for DT projects more inclusive? And how can we boost women's collaboration in designing digital tools?

Our findings also contribute to refining those of other scholars, including Vaton (2015), who deems that DT constitutes an opportunity for the emancipation of women in the workplace. Although Vaton's key recommendation is directed at guiding young women in schools to opt for digital careers, we have shown that regardless of education path, gender issues can still bubble to the top and be visible in disparities between men and women, especially in how they get to participate in DT projects. Implementing policies to reduce gender inequality (Vaton, 2015) in the workplace is an important step on the right direction, yet they also need to be applied at the company level to recruitment and selection for DT projects. Our findings show that part of DT's turf includes collaboration in designing digital tools, which can lead to promotions and an ascending career path. It appears, therefore, that there is a need to carefully think through the issue of access to and involvement in DT projects to ensure that they are more gender inclusive for all employees. In brief, our study's findings join a body of evidence that has shown the long line of gender disparities that continues to be reproduced in a DT context (Benedetto-Meyer et Boboc, 2021; Rivoal, 2020), in our case, the access and forms of involvement in DT projects for Canadian women building their careers in the insurance industry.

Conclusion

The results of our qualitative study conducted with 44 employees in the insurance industry provided an opportunity to understand how customer service and administrative employees in the Canadian insurance industry—the majority of whom are women—experience digital transformation, specifically in relation to building their career paths. Our findings revealed gender issues that characterize a range of entryways to a job in the insurance industry, either following diversified experiences or a training program. At the same time, they revealed a number of gender issues surrounding access to and involvement in DT projects for female employees and their ramifications as barriers or levers in their career paths. The contribution of these findings adds to

the advancement of knowledge by increasing the visibility of gender issues in female employees building their careers in a DT context. These stand out from other studies on DT in the insurance sector—as those studies have primarily focused on ways of integrating digital tools in the work environment—and they point to the need for further understanding of the DT experience, not only in the area of employees' career paths but also on the issues they face at work.

Our study does have two main limitations: the first relates to its narrow context, specifically the Canadian insurance industry. It might be prudent to broaden the research to include other contexts and fields undergoing or impacted by DT processes. The second limitation concerns the social and occupational category of employees. This too warrants further study comparing the experiences of other social and occupational groups, for example, professionals.

Lastly, our study's findings can serve to update knowledge for guidance and counselling practitioners helping employees build their careers in a DT context. They can also help isolate experiences related to their hiring and gender issues that can shape how they build their lifelong career path. We look forward to the next phases of our investigation and analyses that will take a deeper dive into the impacts on DT on remote management.

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Adaptation d'un programme de prévention de l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière auprès de jeunes autistes en milieu scolaire

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Résumé

L'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière affecte de nombreux jeunes, incluant les jeunes autistes. Ces jeunes présentent des besoins particuliers en termes d'orientation, qui ne sont pas toujours considérés dans les interventions en individuel ou en groupe. À la suite de demandes de milieux scolaires, l'équipe de recherche du programme HORS-PISTE Orientation s'est penchée sur les adaptations nécessaires pour répondre aux besoins de cette population. Cet article vise à mettre en lumière les adaptations à apporter aux principaux éléments du programme, selon l'expérience d'une première implantation auprès de cette population. Le programme a été implanté dans deux milieux, auprès de quatre groupes totalisant 24 personnes participantes de quatrième et cinquième secondaire. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'enregistrements audio des rencontres et d'entretiens individuels avec les personnes animatrices et participantes. Elles ont ensuite fait l'objet d'une analyse thématique. Les résultats mettent en évidence les éléments de contexte et de contenu qui fonctionnement bien, mais également ceux qui gagneraient à être adaptées. La discussion propose des recommandations pour l'adaptation de programmes de counseling groupal à une population autiste, incluant l'implication des personnes enseignantes dans l'animation, la formation de groupes relativement homogènes et l'animation d'activités les plus concrètes possibles.

Mots clés : choix de carrière; anxiété; autisme; counseling groupal; milieu scolaire

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Problématique

L'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière est vécue par une personne qui est incitée à faire un choix lié à son orientation scolaire et professionnelle à un moment socialement normé, sans nécessairement posséder les instruments ou les connaissances pour ce faire (Dupuis, 2022). Si cette anxiété peut survenir à tout moment dans le parcours d'un individu, la transition suivant la fin des études secondaires constituerait une période propice à son apparition (Cournoyer et al., 2016). L'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière peut avoir plusieurs effets délétères sur la vie des jeunes, notamment l'évitement de ressources pouvant les aider à réaliser un choix de carrière, la diminution des résultats scolaires et l'abus de substances (Germeijs et al., 2006; Turgeon et Gosselin, 2015).

L'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière chez les jeunes autistes

Les jeunes autistes[1] sont également concernés par ces enjeux. Alors que le taux de prévalence du diagnostic de l'autisme serait en augmentation au Canada (Fédération québécoise de l'autisme, 2024), il apparaît pertinent de se questionner sur la façon dont les jeunes autistes sont affectés par l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière.

1 Dans le cadre de cet article, le choix a été fait de parler de jeunes autistes, plutôt que de jeunes présentant un trouble du spectre de l'autisme (TSA). Ce choix a été réalisé en cohérence avec l'approche inclusive qui cherche à reconnaître la neurodiversité et les préférences exprimées par plusieurs personnes concernées. Ce choix vise à reconnaître l'autisme comme une forme de fonctionnement neurologique, plutôt qu'un trouble à corriger (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

Plusieurs défis en matière d'emploi et de choix de carrière sont rencontrés par les personnes autistes. Leur taux d'emploi s'avère faible en comparaison avec les autres formes de handicap (Shattuck et al., 2012), tout comme leur salaire lorsqu'elles obtiennent un emploi (Roux, 2013). Environ 54 % d'entre elles déclarent avoir besoin de soutien pour la recherche d'emploi (Holc et al., 2024). Elles rencontrent des obstacles liés aux compétences sociales (p. ex. communication), à l'environnement (p. ex. attitude négative des employeurs et collègues) et au travail (p. ex. faible salaire, mauvaises conditions; Harmuth et al., 2018). Wehman et al. (2014) soulèvent le manque de préparation des jeunes autistes pour la vie adulte lorsqu'ils et elles quittent l'école secondaire de même le peu d'implication dans le processus de transition. Bourdon et al. (2015) soulignent également le manque de continuité entre le milieu scolaire et le marché du travail, qui peuvent nuire à l'intégration sociale et profesionnelle de ces jeunes. Finalement, bien que l'implication de l'entourage des jeunes autistes soit importante, les différents conseils et opinions de ces personnes par rapport au choix de carrière peuvent complexifier le processus décisionnel de ces jeunes (Chun et al., 2024).

En outre, l'entrevue d'embauche, souvent déterminante pour l'obtention d'un emploi, peut représenter un défi important pour les jeunes autistes. Les habiletés sociales étant souvent évaluées au cours de l'entrevue (Strickland et al., 2013), il est possible de penser que l'hypersensibilité lors de situations sociales, la difficulté détecter les indices sociaux et à formuler une réponse appropriée (White et al., 2013) puissent faire en sorte que les jeunes autistes rencontrent plus d'obstacles à l'embauche en lien notamment aux préjugés et mécontentions des employeurs étant peu sensibilisés à leur profil, ce qui peut nuire à leur chance d'obtenir ou de maintenir un emploi.

L'intervention groupale avec des jeunes autistes

L'intervention groupale auprès d'une population autiste présente plusieurs avantages, notamment en ce qui concerne le développement des habiletés sociales. Plusieurs études montrent que ce type d'intervention peut être efficace pour travailler les compétences sociales (Gates et al., 2017; Laugeson et al., 2014, 2015; Levy et Dunsmuir, 2020; Mackay et al., 2007), augmenter la fréquence des interactions sociales (Laugeson et al., 2014, 2015; Levy et Dunsmuir, 2020) et réduire l'anxiété sociale (Laugeson et al., 2014). Sur le plan psychologique, les interventions de groupe permettent d'améliorer la qualité de vie (Hesselmark et al., 2014; Jamison et Shuttler, 2017), de réduire l'anxiété (White et al., 2013; McGillivray et Evert, 2014; Weiss et Lunsky, 2010; Luxford et al., 2017; Reaven et al., 2012) ainsi que de diminuer les symptômes dépressifs (McGillivray et Evert, 2014; Santomauro et al., 2016; Weiss et Lunsky, 2010). En général, les personnes participantes et leurs parents rapportent une grande satisfaction à l'égard de ces programmes (McMahon et al., 2013), qui offrent des occasions uniques de socialisation et favorisent un engagement dans un cadre structuré et prévisible (Weiss et Lunsky, 2010).

En ce qui a trait à l'intervention de groupe en situation de choix de carrière auprès d'une population autiste, les programmes existants sont principalement axés sur le développement d'habiletés sociales utiles en milieu de travail. Par exemple, *Aspiration Program* (Hillier, 2007) vise à développer une meilleure compréhension d'enjeux sociaux et professionnels et à offrir des occasions de socialisation aux personnes participantes. Le programme *Acquiring Career, Coping, Executive control, Social Skills (ACCESS) Program* (Oswald et al., 2018) vise le développement de compétences essentielles pour le fonctionnement de manière autonome à l'âge adulte, notamment en matière de socialisation, d'adaptation, d'autodétermination et de gestion du stress. D'autres programmes visent, par exemple, le développement d'habiletés vocationnelles en milieu de travail (Schwartzman, 2021; Kaboski et al., 2015).

Bien que ces programmes favorisent l'acquisition de compétences sociales et professionnelles nécessaires à l'intégration en milieu de travail, peu de recherches se sont penchées spécifiquement sur l'orientation, le choix de carrière et les intérêts professionnels pour les jeunes autistes. Ce faisant, les programmes d'intervention en groupe s'intéressant à cette problématique et développés – ou adaptés – pour cette population sont peu nombreux. Cherchant à implanter un tel programme, des milieux scolaires secondaires ont approché l'équipe de recherche pour adapter le programme HORS-PISTE Orientation (Dupuis, 2022) à une clientèle de jeunes autistes en transition vers la vie adulte.

Le programme HORS-PISTE Orientation (Dupuis, 2022) vise la prévention de l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière chez les élèves du secondaire. Il s'inscrit dans le champ du counseling de carrière groupal, dans une perspective culturelle-historique de l'activité découlant des travaux de Vygotski (1931/2014). En cohérence avec la perspective selon laquelle l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière émerge alors que la personne est incitée à faire un choix, sans nécessairement posséder les instruments ou les connaissances pour ce faire, HORS-PISTE Orientation se veut un espace de transmission-acquisition de ces instruments (Dupuis, 2022). Ces instruments incluent des concepts scientifiques (p. ex. intérêts, valeurs, anxiété) qui permettent de structurer le rapport entre la personne et son environnement, puis d'agir sur le monde en pleine connaissance de cause (Saussez, 2017). Ils incluent également des systèmes d'action (p. ex. processus de prise de décision, exploration vocationnelle, moyens pour comprendre et agir sur l'anxiété) qui, sans dicter les étapes exactes à accomplir, organisent les actions à poser dans une situation donnée à partir de savoirs déjà acquis (Dionne et al., 2017). Différents ateliers sont proposés au sein du programme et permettent une mise en jeu des instruments sur le plan collectif, qui sont progressivement acquis sur le plan individuel, ce qui permet le développement de nouvelles capacités à agir par les personnes participantes (Dupuis, 2024).

L'évaluation préliminaire du programme a démontré des résultats encourageants pour l'accompagnement des jeunes dans la réalisation d'un choix de carrière auprès de jeunes de 4e et de 5e secondaire (Dupuis, 2024; Dupuis et Saussez, 2022). De plus, il n'existe pas d'autres programmes, à notre connaissance, centré spécifiquement sur l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière chez les jeunes (Dupuis et al, 2021), ce qui a amené les milieux intéressés à contacter l'équipe de recherche. Néanmoins, il s'avérait nécessaire d'adapter le programme spécifiquement pour de jeunes autistes, ce qui a amené l'équipe de recherche à se pencher sur l'adaptation du programme.

L'adaptation de programmes

L'adaptation ou la modification de programmes d'intervention, pour tenir compte des différences entre le contexte dans lequel le programme a été conçu et celui dans lequel on souhaite l'implanter, est fréquente (Lundgren et al., 2011). Cette adaptation peut être bénéfique pour l'implantation et le maintien du programme d'intervention, tout comme elle peut diminuer sa capacité à atteindre les objectifs visés par son implantation (Stirman et al., 2013), ce qui appelle à une certaine prudence.

Les besoins langagiers, cognitifs et sociaux rencontrés par les jeunes autistes peuvent limiter leur accès à diverses interventions thérapeutiques (Reaven, 2012) qui ne les considèrent pas nécessairement. De plus, cette population présente souvent des profils hétérogènes en termes de besoins, capacités et intérêts, ce qui peut compliquer la mise en place d'interventions standardisées (Chun et al., 2024). De plus, des comorbidités courantes, avec différents troubles anxieux ou le TDAH, peuvent complexifier les besoins à adresser et limiter l'efficacité des interventions (Antshel et al., 2011). Également, les systèmes de soutien de ces jeunes ne sont pas toujours bien coordonnés ou formés pour comprendre les besoins spécifiques de cette population (Rumrill et al., 2023), ce qui amène souvent les personnes professionnelles, ici de l'orientation, à devoir naviguer entre les attentes des jeunes, de leurs proches et des institutions tout en gérant des contraintes de temps et ressources.

Pour ces raisons, plusieurs aspects clés sont donc à considérer pour l'adaptation d'un programme à une clientèle autiste. Les interventions soutenues dans le temps (Miller et al., 2014) et les interventions structurées et prévisibles (Weiss et Lunsky, 2010) seraient souvent plus efficaces auprès de cette population. Rumrill et al. (2023) soulignent l'importance d'intervenir de manière précoce tout en suivant des lignes directrices claires. De plus, Stichter et al. (2019) insistent sur l'importance de la composition des groupes. Par exemple, pour optimiser les interventions sociales des jeunes autistes, il serait préférable d'intégrer des pairs plus dynamiques, mais aussi d'éviter une trop grande hétérogénéité qui pourrait freiner les apprentissages. De plus, il s'avérerait important d'offrir aux jeunes autistes une intervention adaptée à leurs forces et besoins, tout en favorisant l'implication des parents ou tuteurs afin d'assurer une continuité et d'aligner les objectifs d'intervention avec les attentes familiales (Chun et al., 2024; Lee et Carter, 2012; Rumrill et al., 2023). Certaines stratégies spécifiques seraient à prioriser par l'équipe d'intervention, telles que l'enseignement concret et visuel, les listes de choix multiples, les formes d'expression créatives (p. ex. par le dessin) et la modélisation vidéo (Moree et Davis, 2010; Reaven et al., 2012). Finalement, l'équipe devrait veiller à ne pas

sous-estimer les forces des personnes autistes afin de ne pas restreindre leurs options (Rumrill et al., 2023). Une vision déficitaire de leur capacité pourrait entrainer des inégalités pour ces populations (Lachance et al., 2025).

À partir d'une revue de la littérature, Escoffery et al. (2019) proposent 11 étapes pour l'adaptation d'un programme : 1) évaluation de la communauté, 2) compréhension de l'intervention, 3) choix de l'intervention, 4) consultation avec les experts, 5) consultation avec les partenaires, 6) décision quant à ce qui doit être adapté, 7) adaptation du programme original, 8) formation du personnel, 9) test du matériel adapté, 10) implantation et 11) évaluation (Escoffery et al., 2019). Ces étapes ne sont pas nécessairement utilisées de façon systématique dans un processus d'adaptation de programme, les circonstances pouvant nécessiter d'en ajouter ou d'en retirer.

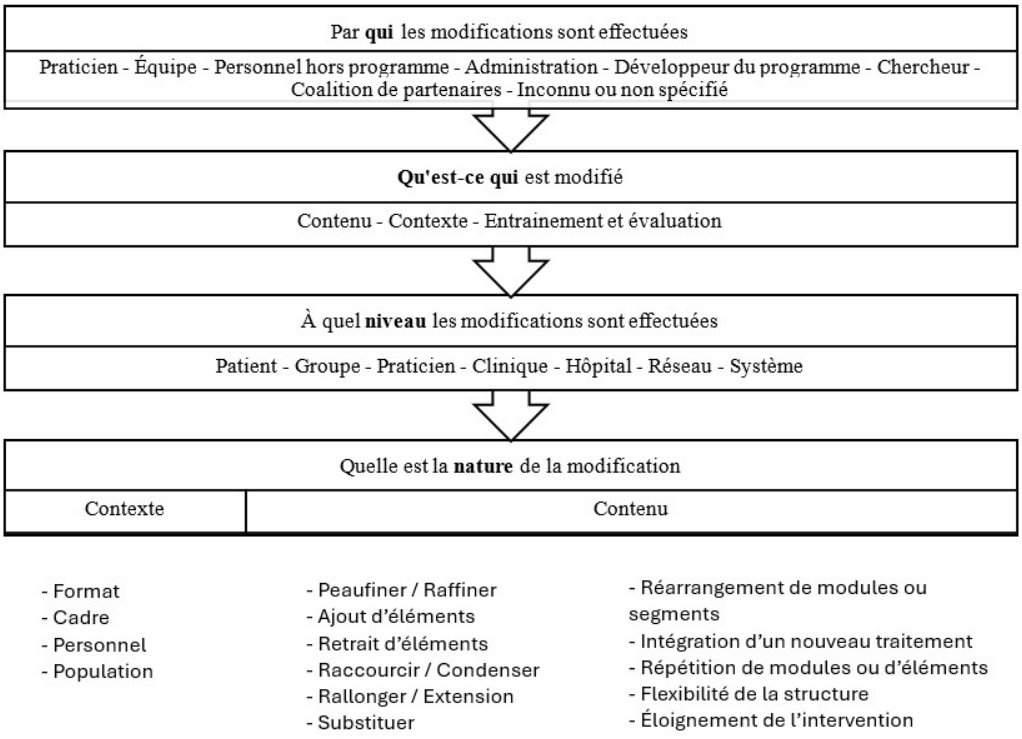
L'équipe de recherche a été approchée par des milieux scolaires qui souhaitaient implanter le programme HORS-PISTE Orientation auprès d'une population autiste, alors que les étapes un à trois avaient déjà été accomplies. Cet article porte plus particulièrement sur les étapes quatre à sept de l'adaptation du programme. L'objectif de cet article est de mettre en lumière les adaptations à apporter aux principaux éléments du programme, afin de considérer les besoins des jeunes autistes y participant, selon l'expérience d'une première implantation auprès de cette population et des retombées qui en ont découlées.

Cadre d'analyse

Afin d'identifier les éléments du programme HORS-PISTE Orientation qui devront être adaptés pour des jeunes autistes, la taxonomie de Stirman et ses collaborateurs (2013) a été retenue. Celle-ci permet d'identifier et de comprendre la nature des modifications apportées à une intervention – que ce soit volontaire ou non – et qui peuvent avoir un impact sur l'implantation de celle-ci. Elle est présentée dans la figure ci-dessous (figure 1).

Figure 1

Système de classification des modifications à des programmes ou interventions basés sur des données probantes (Stirman et al., 2013)



Les personnes autrices divisent les modifications possibles en quatre catégories : 1) la personne ou l'organisation en charge de faire les modifications, 2) l'élément – ou les éléments – du programme qui doivent être adaptés, 3) les personnes ou les organisations qui bénéficient des adaptations et 4) ce qui est adapté dans le programme, que ce soit par rapport au contexte (p.ex. format) ou au contenu (p.ex. ajout ou retrait d'éléments).

Dans le cas de cet article, les trois premières catégories ont déjà été établies. Les modifications ont été effectuées par la personne animatrice, en concertation avec l'équipe de recherche – aussi responsable du développement du programme. Ce qui est modifié est le contenu et le contexte, en réponse aux besoins d'une nouvelle population, les jeunes autistes. Les modifications sont effectuées au niveau de la personne animatrice, qui suggère des ajustements au guide d'animation et au cahier de la personne participante, afin d'assurer une meilleure adéquation entre les besoins des jeunes autistes et le programme proposé. Cet article se situera ainsi dans la quatrième catégorie, c'est-à-dire en ce qui a trait à la nature des modifications, en cherchant à identifier les principaux éléments du contexte et du contenu du programme HORS-PISTE Orientation à adapter pour s'assurer de répondre aux besoins des jeunes autistes.

Méthodologie

Les personnes participantes et procédures

Cette recherche a adopté une méthode d'étude de cas multiples (Adams et al., 2022; Fortin et Gagnon, 2022) auprès de quatre groupes ayant implanté le programme HORS-PISTE Orientation (Dupuis, 2022). Les personnes participantes (PP) proviennent de deux écoles secondaires du Québec. Ils ont été animés par les conseillères d'orientation (CO) de ces écoles à raison d'une rencontre par semaine pour un total variant entre 12 et 16 heures d'intervention selon les groupes. Les PP sont inscrites dans un programme de soutien particulier à l'école et chaque groupe-classe participe au programme HORS-PISTE Orientation. Chaque groupe est formé de 5 à 7 PP, dont la majorité – sinon la totalité – a un diagnostic d'autisme. Au total, les groupes considérés dans le cadre de cet article regroupent 24 élèves âgés de 16 ou 17 ans, 18 garçons et 6 filles. Afin de préserver la confidentialité des personnes participantes, tous les prénoms ont été remplacés par des prénoms fictifs dans la présentation des résultats.

La collecte de données

Les données ont été recueillies au moyen de trois sources : 1) l'enregistrement audio et la transcription des rencontres du groupe (R; n = 42), 2) l'enregistrement et la transcription des entretiens individuels avec les personnes intervenantes (EI_PI; n = 3) menés deux semaines après la fin du programme et 3) l'enregistrement et la transcription des entretiens individuels avec des personnes participantes volontaires (EI_PP; n = 4) menés trois mois après la fin du programme. L'enregistrement des rencontres avait pour objectif la description de l'activité du groupe et des processus qui s'y déroulent. Les entretiens individuels avaient pour objectif de permettre aux personnes intervenantes et participantes de faire un retour sur leur participation et les apprentissages réalisés – ou non. Le projet a reçu l'approbation des comités d'éthique de la recherche de l'Université de Sherbrooke et de l'Université de Moncton.

L'analyse des données

Les verbatims des entrevues avec les personnes animatrices ont fait l'objet d'une analyse thématique inductive (Paillé et Mucchielli, 2021). Une première lecture des entrevues a été d'abord été réalisée afin de permettre une appropriation du corpus. Une thématisation en continu (Paillé et Mucchielli, 2021) a ensuite été menée, où le corpus a été analysé visant l'identification de thèmes émergents, construisant ainsi graduellement l'arbre thématique. Soutenu par NVivo 14, les extraits du corpus se rapportant à chacun de ces thèmes ont été codés au nœud associé. Dans un premier temps, chaque entrevue a été analysée de façon indépendante,

puis elles ont été comparées entre elles afin de permettre l'identification de convergences, récurrences et de divergences.

Par la suite, les transcriptions des enregistrements vidéo des rencontres de groupe ont fait l'objet d'une analyse en mode écriture (Paillé et Mucchielli, 2021). Cette approche a permis, au fur et à mesure, de noter et d'analyser les observations quant à ce qui se passait dans les rencontres de groupe. Une attention particulière a été portée aux moments significatifs identifiés par les personnes animatrices dans les entrevues, de même qu'aux principaux thèmes émergents de l'analyse thématique précédemment réalisée.

Résultats

Cette section présente les résultats obtenus et identifie les adaptations apportées – ou à apporter – au programme HORS-PISTE Orienta, selon leur appartenance au contexte de l'intervention ou à son contenu, tel que définis par Stirman et al. (2013).

Contexte

Accueil et soutien de l'équipe-école

Un élément qui peut être adapté en référence au contexte est le cadre d'implantation et le personnel impliqué. Dans le cas des milieux ayant implanté HORS-PISTE Orientation auprès d'élèves autistes, l'accueil et le soutien de l'équipe-école ont été identifiés comme particulièrement importants. De fait, les personnes animatrices indiquent que l'adhésion de l'équipe-école a été précieuse dans l'implantation du programme : « avoir l'appui de l'équipe-école, ça a été vraiment, vraiment gagnant. […] j'ai eu beaucoup d'ouverture, carte blanche avec cette classe, avec cette école-là, dans cette école-là, c'était le fun » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI)[2].

Un autre élément ayant été adapté pour l'implantation du programme auprès de jeunes autistes et l'ajout d'une deuxième – voire une troisième – personne animatrice. Cette personne supplémentaire était habituellement l'enseignante du groupe-classe ou la personne technicienne en éducation spécialisée (TES) qui y est associée : « L'enseignante et la TES ont été super présentes à toutes les rencontres, participaient, intervenaient, accompagnaient certains élèves » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Leur présence et leur soutien s'est avéré aidant pour la gestion de classe : « ça permettait aussi une meilleure gestion, parce que ça pouvait dérailler aussi, mais il y avait comme une solidité au niveau de la gestion, tandis que là, moi, je suis un élément externe qui arrive une fois par semaine » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI) Pendant les rencontres de groupe, elles donnaient à certains moments des consignes aux élèves, par exemple : « Levez la main pour répondre pour pas que tout le monde parle en même temps s'il vous plait » (TES_G6_R4). Elles pouvaient également intervenir dans le cas de comportements dérangeants : « Je sais que tu fais des blagues, mais là, tu dépasses un petit peu la limite. […] On va aller prendre une marche, discuter » (Enseignante_G10_R5); « Non, ce n'est pas drôle du tout, je ne veux pas entendre tes commentaires » (Enseignante_G11_R6). Cet apport de l'enseignante ou de la TES à la gestion du groupe est reconnue par les CO, qui reconnaissent parfois un certain manque de contrôle et soulignant l'apport de l'enseignante ou de la TES pour : « tu sais, essayer de ramener [l'attention] » (Marie, PI, G10-11_EI).

Les personnes animatrices soulignent également la richesse de l'apport de l'enseignante et de la TES. Puisqu'elles connaissent mieux les élèves, leur participation active aux rencontres de groupe a eu apport significatif : « elles les connaissent plus que moi. […] être capable d'aller plus loin sur des questions où elles avaient des plus d'informations que moi, sur comment travailler certains éléments […] il y avait une certaine profondeur qu'elles pouvaient amener » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI). La complémentarité des perspectives entre les différentes personnes intervenantes ressort également des entrevues :

> Il y avait quand même une richesse intéressante. Des fois, ils amenaient effectivement des différents points de vue. […] Ça les amenait ailleurs. Ça m'aidait à aller voir d'autres, d'autres perspectives que je n'avais pas

2 Les codes utilisés représentent les groupes (G) d'appartenance des personnes participantes, ainsi que les circonstances où l'information a été obtenue : rencontre du groupe (R) ou entretien individuel (EI).

> vues dans ma lignée parce qu'ils avaient leur perspective TES, puis perspective enseignante. Puis je trouve ça riche comme façon d'intervenir. (Marie, CO_10-11_EI)

Elle ajoute également que la présence de l'enseignante et de la TES a permis « de cheminer puis d'amener d'autres perspectives, des choses que je n'ai pas vues. Fait que ça venait comme dynamiser, puis enrichir comme la conversation » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI).

Le format de groupe

Le fait d'animer le contenu d'HORS-PISTE Orientation en groupe représente à la fois un aspect positif et négatif du programme, selon les personnes participantes, ce qui amène à questionner l'adaptabilité de cet élément du programme. Si le groupe est apparu comme une modalité moins propice pour certains, d'autres élèves ont exprimé une préférence pour le groupe : « Ça crée plus une différence en groupe qu'en individuel. […] Je préfère mieux ça en groupe. […] Je ne sais pas, essayer de discuter de nos points de vue » (Élève_G10_ 9). Le groupe a permis d'offrir aux élèves un espace de réflexion et de partage de leur vécu. Cette personne animatrice partage comment le groupe a permis aux élèves de parler de ce qu'ils vivent à propos de la transition postsecondaire qu'ils s'apprêtaient à vivre :

> De permettre à l'élève de parler de son anxiété, puis du stress face au choix. Je trouve que ça amène une belle ouverture […]. C'est le fun [la transition postsecondaire], mais oui, ça génère de l'anxiété puis du stress, puis ça peut les paralyser beaucoup. Ça, je trouve que c'est un bel avantage. (Laurence, CO_G8_EI)

Au-delà d'en parler et de normaliser le stress et l'anxiété ressentis, le groupe a permis aux PP d'être accompagnées dans cette transition d'importance :

> C'est quand même intéressant, le fait de partir tout le monde ensemble dans un processus de réflexion en groupe, puis on va travailler aussi l'anxiété, c'est rassurant. […] de se sentir pris en compte, qu'ils sont pris en charge d'une manière ou une autre, ils ne sont pas tout seuls. […] Il y a quelque chose de réconfortant là-dedans aussi, de dire que je ne suis pas tout seul. (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI)

En étant en groupe, les élèves ont aussi pu se soutenir entre eux : « c'était avantageux, parce que, bien ils pouvaient peut-être plus se confier, un pouvait donner un conseil ou dire : « Hey, as-tu essayé telle affaire? » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). » Le groupe a permis aux élèves de créer ou de renforcer les liens entre les membres : « vivre quelque chose en commun, ça tissé des liens entre eux » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI). Dans les enregistrements des rencontres de groupe, on peut constater de beaux partages de soutien entre les élèves, qui se remercient mutuellement de leur soutien. Ce soutien se remarque notamment dans la capacité des élèves à s'ouvrir et s'exprimer, ce qui donne lieu à des échanges comme celui-ci :

> **Flore** : David est quand même quelqu'un de relativement secret. Tu ne parles pas tant de ta vie personnelle. […] Puis, dans [nom], tu t'es vraiment ouvert. Tu nous as parlé de ce que tu aimerais faire. Les points positifs. Les points négatifs.
> **David** : Juste remercier. Je me suis senti comme respecté. Justement, je n'aime pas parler, tu vois de moi, mes intérêts et tout. Là, je me suis senti respecté fait que ça m'a permis de m'ouvrir un peu (G6_R9)

En plus de permettre aux élèves de développer des liens entre eux, le format de groupe a favorisé la création de lien entre les élèves et la CO : « j'ai créé un lien différent que de les voir juste une fois, une fois ou deux ou trois, ou dans mon bureau » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Une animatrice partage que comme CO, les rencontres en individuel sont souvent ponctuelles, alors qu'avec le programme « on parle de ce sujet-là toutes les semaines pendant neuf semaines, pas juste une ou deux fois dans l'année. […] On est ensemble. Tu me vois tout le temps, tu peux me poser des questions, on peut démystifier des choses. C'est sécurisant » (Marie, CO_ 10-11_EI). Le fait de les rencontrer et les accompagner sur une base plus régulière a permis aux personnes

animatrices de renforcer le lien avec les élèves. Cet aspect revient de façon récurrente dans les entrevues, alors que le groupe a permis aux élèves et aux CO de développer leur relation et de mieux se connaître. Cela fait en sorte que les élèves se sentent plus à l'aise de faire appel aux services de la conseillère d'orientation :

> J'ai eu des élèves qui ont commencé à venir me voir au bureau, ben ils sont plus confortables avec moi parce que là je suis rendue accessible. J'ai toujours été accessible, mais là encore plus parce qu'on a, on a ce lien d'appartenance-là qui s'est créé. (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI)

Finalement, un autre apport de la modalité de groupe a été de contribuer à ce que certains élèves développent des compétences sociales au fil des rencontres. Une personne animatrice partage l'évolution qu'elle a pu constater :

> J'ai eu un [élève] qui était rendu plus confortable dans le contexte de groupe, puis ça, ça a été vraiment un beau cheminement pour lui. Parce qu'autant qu'au début, il était comme réfractaire, il ne comprenait pas, il ne savait pas quoi dire, [...] que à la fin, il participait, il faisait des phrases cohérentes. J'étais comme : *Oh my god!* C'est beau. (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI)

Une autre personne animatrice a pu voir aussi une belle évolution dans la participation dans le groupe d'un de ses élèves :

> J'ai vu une progression. Au début, il était toujours à côté de la question, il fallait le ramener. Puis à la fin, il était plus volontaire à vouloir parler, tu sais? J'ai trouvé ça intéressant dans la dynamique qui a évoluée. (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI)

Il semble ainsi que le format de groupe ait été aidant à plusieurs égards, mais les personnes intervenantes rapportent également plusieurs défis. Dans un premier temps, bien que les liens créés soient reconnus, les personnes intervenantes rapportent aussi qu'avec des jeunes autistes l'établissement d'une dynamique de groupe « est plus long et plus difficile » (Isabelle, CO_G8_EI). Si la plupart des élèves fonctionnaient somme toute assez bien en groupe, il est apparu que c'était davantage un défi pour certains : « en individuel, elle fonctionne bien, mais en groupe, non, c'est plus difficile » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Cette personne animatrice soulève comment l'autisme peut constituer un obstacle à la participation au groupe, par exemple pour cet élève : « Il n'a pas évolué : il ne comprenait pas, il ne suivait pas, il était beaucoup [...] dans sa bulle tout au long. Il y a des niveaux TSA qui ne sont peut-être pas propices au groupe » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI). Cette animatrice explique également : « J'ai eu un [élève] hyper rigide [...]. Il était souvent en retrait, souvent pas participatif [...]. Puis quand on allait chercher [l'inviter à participer en prenant la parole], il ne savait même pas de quoi on parlait, qu'il fallait qu'on redonne la consigne » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI).

En ce sens, le fait d'avoir des élèves se situant à différents niveaux de fonctionnement ou d'aisance dans un groupe a représenté un obstacle : « ce n'est pas un groupe qui avait tous les mêmes défis. Donc, j'ai des élèves qui étaient un peu plus autonomes, un peu moins de caractéristiques du TSA claires. Donc il y en a certains qui fonctionnent bien » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Un constat similaire ressort du partage de cette personne animatrice : « certains qui étaient peut-être plus verbaux moteurs [...]. Puis j'avais à l'opposé un qui avait une difficulté langagière. C'était difficile de comprendre le sens de ce qu'il voulait dire » (Marie, CO_ G10- 11_EI). Cette personne animatrice résume bien ce défi :

> J'ai trouvé ça difficile, parce que ce n'étaient pas des groupes très homogènes au niveau des difficultés, ce qui faisait en sorte que j'avais toujours soit quelqu'un parle beaucoup, puis il y en a qui ne parlent pas du tout. Puis là, quand ils parlent, on ne comprend pas trop ce que, tu sais, comme, ce qu'il veut dire, ou il est complètement, il répond à une question complètement à côté. Fait que, pour moi, j'étais en train d'essayer de tricoter tout ça. J'essayais, tu sais, comme de faire du sens à travers de ça. (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI)

La gestion des comportements dits perturbateurs a aussi été identifiée comme un enjeu qui, bien que n'étant pas unique aux élèves autistes, est ressorti de façon importante. La dynamique de groupe, par moment, « pouvait dérailler […]. Moi, je suis un élément externe qui arrive une fois par semaine » (Marie, CO_G10-11_ EI). L'animatrice nomme avoir dû composer avec certains défis de gestion de groupe : « Il y a des fous rires, il y en a un qui dormait, il était couché sur son bureau, puis il ne voulait pas rester comme assis, puis être dans le groupe » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI). Les personnes intervenantes, soutenues par les personnes enseignantes et TES, ont alors dû intervenir et faire de la gestion de classe. Par exemple, elles sont intervenues auprès d'élèves affectant la dynamique de groupe : « Je ne veux pas que vous mettiez ensemble parce qu'il y a comme trop d'énergie électrique entre vous deux. Il y a comme… juste vous regarder, puis vous riez » (Laurence, CO_G8_R3). Elles doivent aussi revenir fréquemment sur les normes de bon fonctionnement du groupe : « "Wow, vous êtes vraiment fatigués, hein?" Bien là, tu sais, au début de nos rencontres, on parlait de respect : "Tu sais, quand quelqu'un parle, de l'écouter. Mais là, on est à l'extérieur un peu de cette norme-là qu'on a établie entre nous" » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI).

Contenu

Aspect concret des activités

L'importance que les interventions et les contenus soient concrets ressort de façon importante. Les activités d'orientation professionnelle portant sur de l'information sur la formation et le travail et permettant d'explorer, générer et valider des options professionnelles ont été particulièrement appréciées par plusieurs élèves. L'une des personnes intervenantes partage : « ce qui est plus aidant, c'est l'aspect plus recherche, quand on les met vraiment dans le concret… » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI). Elle précise que « tout ce qui est concret. Quand on faisait de la recherche, on est sur Internet, on est en train de faire l'activité de : « C'est quoi, le pré-DEP? C'est quoi, les DEP, cégep? » Ça, là, ils sont tous là » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI). Dans les enregistrements des rencontres de groupe, on observe que les élèves sont particulièrement attentifs et intéressés et participent activement durant ces activités.

Ces activités semblent répondre à un besoin d'information sur la formation et le travail : « au niveau de l'information scolaire, je pense que ça permet justement de mieux clarifier cette partie-là. C'est vraiment l'exploration, c'est vraiment le volet exploration qui est quand même intéressant, parce que ça leur donne plus de temps à faire de la recherche encadrée » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI). Même, davantage de temps d'exploration scolaire et professionnelle pourrait être un atout : « J'aurais peut-être amené d'autres… recherches, d'autres sites internet, peut-être plus longtemps sur l'exploration de formation » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). On observe durant les rencontres de groupe que les élèves auraient à certains moments continué les activités d'exploration : « Je vous ai laissé même plus de temps que prévu. Je voyais que vous étiez parti dans un élan de motivation […] malheureusement, il faut arrêter » (Laurence, CO_G8_R6).

À l'inverse, certaines activités, qui portaient sur des concepts abstraits, ou qui mobilisaient des analogies ou des métaphores, ou des questions abstraites ou vagues, ont posé un défi avec certains élèves. C'est ce que partage cette personne animatrice : « le volet abstrait était difficile pour eux […]. C'est quoi ça l'analogie, c'est quoi cette image? […] tout ce qui ramenait à la sensation ou l'imagerie […]. Mais dès qu'on restait dans le concret, ça allait bien » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI). Ce fût le cas, par exemple, pour cette élève : « il y avait comme quelque chose de tellement abstrait. Moi, j'en ai une […] ça l'a [l'élève] envahie d'anxiété, complètement » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI)

L'activité de la montagne en est un exemple, qui a recours à la métaphore. Les personnes animatrices tentent d'expliquer aux élèves ce qu'ils doivent faire : « Il faut que tu m'expliques […] le chemin que tu as pris pour te rendre. C'est ça le… en image. On va utiliser un peu l'aspect d'analogie » (Marie, CO_G10-11_R1). Mais l'activité a été difficile à comprendre pour certains élèves : « Je n'ai rien compris » (Élève, G6_R1); « Je ne comprends pas. […] Je ne suis pas sûr de comprendre » (Élève, G10_R1); « Je ne vois pas trop ce que ça veut dire » (Élève, G10_R1). En constatant que la métaphore était difficile à comprendre (« C'est sûr que c'est une activité qui est très abstraite, puis c'est un peu difficile au niveau de la conception », Marie, CO_G10-11_R1), les personnes animatrices ont tenté de s'ajuster pour faciliter la compréhension de l'activité : « Est-ce que tu as

compris Justine? Ok. Je vais lui expliquer dans d'autres mots. Peut-être que ça va être plus facile » (Isabelle, CO_G06_R1). Ce défi est revenu également dans les entrevues avec les personnes animatrices : « ça n'a pas passé. […] pour cette clientèle-là. […] Ils ne comprennent pas. […] J'ai dû passer 20 minutes pour expliquer, répéter, répéter de différentes façons avec la TES » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI). Dans le même sens, une personne animatrice nomme avoir eu « bien de la misère à leur expliquer. […] J'essayais d'être simple, mais même moi, j'avais de la misère à le simplifier pour qu'ils comprennent » (Laurence, CO_G08_EI).

Les personnes animatrices soulèvent aussi le défi d'aborder des vécus affectifs et de les amener à contacter leurs émotions ou de faire des interventions ou activités pour approfondir leur conscience d'eux-mêmes. L'une des personnes animatrices explique qu'ils ont eu « beaucoup de difficultés à nommer. Beaucoup de difficulté à se projeter. C'était difficile de les amener à bien à réfléchir, puis à faire une introspection un petit peu plus approfondie. Parce que, pour eux, tu sais, c'est difficile » (Laurence, CO_G08_EI). Cette autre personne animatrice abonde dans le même sens : « dans l'abstrait, dans : " on va converser, on va parler, on va aller un petit peu plus dans le profond ", pour toucher à des émotions, ça ne fonctionne pas. On les perd » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI).

Limiter les activités de pleine conscience

Les activités de méditation et de pleine conscience ont représenté un défi dans l'animation du groupe. Si ces activités ont été appréciées et ont bien fonctionné pour certains élèves (« c'était cool […] Je me sens détendu », Élève, G10_R6), ce n'était pas le cas avec plusieurs des élèves. Certains élèves avaient de la difficulté à faire sérieusement ces activités : « Je me retenais pour ne pas rire. Rémi, il riait un peu, puis Justin, il a fait une joke » (Élève, G11_R6). À une autre occasion, la personne animatrice soulève ce constat : « qui a vraiment fait l'activité de méditation? […] Parce qu'il y a eu beaucoup de bougeotte, beaucoup de fous rires » (Marie, CO_G10-11_R4). C'est par moment un défi de rester concentré et faire les exercices jusqu'au bout : « Je ne sais pas, je n'ai pas trop écouté la fin » (Élève, G10_R7); « genre je me suis endormi » (Élève, G10_R7). Dans l'entrevue, Marie (CO_G10-11_EI) partage que lors de la méditation, « ça a été difficile, d'entrer dans leur corps. […] Je ne me souviens plus si c'est pour tout le monde, mais peu de gens se sont rendus à la fin […]. Ils ont suivi les directives, mais ils ont trouvé ça difficile ». Certains élèves témoignent peu d'intérêt ou d'ouverture pour ces exercices : « on leur présente des outils de pleine conscience, mais ils ne vont même pas les utiliser. […] ils connaissent les techniques de méditation puis de pleine conscience, mais ils ne sont pas intéressés à faire ça. […] mais ils ont d'autres techniques » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI)

À plusieurs reprises, des élèves ont nommé ne pas parvenir à faire les exercices de méditation proposés : « quand je suis trop anxieuse. […] je ne suis pas assez capable, je ne suis pas assez bonne pour réussir à entrer dans une phase de méditation. Il faut que je me calme d'une autre manière » (Élève, G11_R4). Un autre élève partage dans le groupe : « pour moi, j'ai l'impression que ça ne marche pas vraiment beaucoup. […] Peut-être que je ne le fais pas assez correctement » (Élève, G11_R6). Pour certains, même, ces activités suscitent davantage de stress et d'anxiété : « ça me stresse. […] Juste le fait qu'il n'y ait pas de bruit ». Une élève partage son vécu durant lorsqu'elle tente de méditer :

> Moi c'est mon hamster. Il roule comme si je venais de lui donner un champignon dans Mario Bros. Encore plus quand je fais de la méditation. Fait que là moi je me sens poche parce que je ne suis pas capable de juste pas penser puis respirer. T'sais quelque chose de basic là. Puis là je me sens poche. Fait que là ça continue, puis là ça me fait faire de l'anxiété. (Élève, G6_R4)

Dans les entrevues, des personnes animatrices soulèvent le défi que peut représenter la méditation et la pleine conscience pour des élèves autistes : « pour les groupes plus TSA, je pense que la pleine conscience, ce n'est vraiment pas un moyen qui est très favorable […] c'est peut-être, il y a quelque chose par rapport à l'hypersensibilité d'être dans son corps? » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI). Une autre personne animatrice soulève un constat similaire, et partage que certains élèves n'avaient pas aimé « le volet pleine conscience, rester dans son corps, parce qu'il y a, surtout les TSA, quelque chose au niveau des sensations. L'hypersensibilité, tout ça fait que peut-être le côté pleine conscience, ce n'est peut-être pas très adapté » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI).

S'assurer de répondre aux besoins des élèves

Si globalement le programme est apparu comme pertinent pour répondre aux besoins des élèves, certains contenus et certaines activités étaient moins en adéquation avec les besoins de certains élèves. Dans certains groupes, les principaux besoins étaient davantage répondus avec les activités liées à l'orientation scolaire et professionnelle, alors que moins d'élèves manifestaient un besoin en lien avec l'anxiété : « ils n'ont pas mentionné beaucoup que l'anxiété… oui, il y en a qui ont un trouble anxieux. […] Mais sinon, les autres, ce n'est pas une dominance chez eux, l'anxiété » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Certains élèves le nomment pendant les rencontres de groupe : « je ne suis pas trop anxieux pour mon choix de carrière » (Élève, G10_R1); « pour le sujet de l'anxiété, je ne me sentais pas trop anxieux. Et pour le processus de choix de carrière, j'ai déjà une carrière que j'ai envie d'avoir, en tête » (Élève, G10_R1). Les personnes animatrices partagent que, préalablement au groupe, les élèves ont souvent déjà été accompagnés et ont déjà travaillé les enjeux liés à l'anxiété, de sorte qu'ils avaient déjà des outils pour composer avec l'anxiété : « ils ont déjà des moyens. […] c'est pour ça que, avec ma clientèle, je te dirais, vu qu'ils sont plus bien plus autonomes dans leur anxiété, bien ça s'y prête un petit peu moins, je pense » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Elle explique et précise :

> L'anxiété, ça fait longtemps qu'ils en ont, des moyens pour abaisser leur anxiété, avec un TES dans la classe tout le temps, puis un psychoéducateur au bout de la porte, puis l'autre intervenante qui les reçoit s'ils sont trop anxieux. Puis tu sais, les moyens, ils les connaissent, là. Fait que, je te dirais que ça, moins. Fait que c'est pour ça que je nommais plus ce qui avait rapport à l'orientation, choix de carrière, puis l'anxiété face au choix, plus que l'anxiété point. (Laurence, CO_G8_EI)

Néanmoins, bien que l'anxiété soit moins un besoin pour certains élèves, ce volet ressort tout de même comme un atout du programme : « le fait que le programme travaille aussi l'anxiété, ça amène un plus que juste un processus d'orientation fait qu'il y a comme une double vocation à travers le programme qui est quand même intéressante » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI).

Pour ce qui est du volet orientation scolaire et professionnelle, il est arrivé aussi que certains contenus avaient déjà été abordés, avec lesquels les élèves étaient déjà familiers, et donc, qui répondaient moins à un besoin : « il y a des choses peut-être que j'aurais moins faites, ou j'aurais peut-être fait parfois deux rencontres en une. […] Parce que j'aurais peut-être été plus vite, étant donné que le système scolaire était vu » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Elle explique que : « Repères, il y en avait beaucoup qui le connaissaient déjà. Il y a eu beaucoup de choses qui étaient déjà comme acquises, ou en tout cas, en voie de, c'était plus facile. Il y en avait déjà qui avaient cheminé, puis qui avaient déjà leur choix, leur plan » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Certains élèves, qui avaient déjà un projet professionnel assez défini, ont d'ailleurs exprimé qu'ils avaient vu une pertinence moindre à participer au groupe, par exemple une élève nomme que [nom] « devrait être plus ciblé sur certains élèves. Admettons, moi qui savais déjà où aller, j'étais déjà en train de faire le processus de sélection, je voyais moins nécessairement le contexte de me faire découvrir d'autres métiers » (Élève, G11_EI).

Offrir un espace de réflexion

Les résultats mettent en lumière comment le programme a permis d'offrir aux élèves, pendant plusieurs semaines, un espace et des occasions de réflexion, de prises de conscience et de mise en action. Différentes activités ont permis aux élèves de réfléchir sur eux-mêmes et sur leur avenir professionnel, ce qui est apparu comme aidant : « la beauté du programme, c'est que pendant neuf semaines consécutives, on réfléchit sur la carrière » (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI); « apprendre à mieux se connaître, […] se projeter dans l'avenir, d'analyser un programme d'études ou une profession, puis se poser la question, aussi : « Est-ce que ça correspond à ce que je veux, à ce que je suis, à ce que j'aime » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Cela a aussi donné des outils aux élèves à cet égard : « Ils ont appris quelque chose par rapport au choix. […] une nouvelle posture, sur comment aborder un choix de réflexion en orientation, de choix de carrière […] Quand je suis mêlée bien, voici les outils que je peux utiliser. On l'a fait en groupe et que c'est sécurisant » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI).

Ces occasions de réflexion ont permis à plusieurs élèves de cheminer dans leur processus de prise de décision et de choix de carrière. Une personne animatrice partage la progression qu'elle a observée chez l'un de ses élèves : « je [le] suivais depuis quand même 3 ans avant, parce qu'il était très anxieux, […] il a participé au processus de groupe, parce que lui sa difficulté c'était d'arrêter son choix. […] puis à la fin il a dit comme : je suis prêt à faire un choix » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI). Un autre élève a cheminé de façon importante entre le début et la fin du groupe en ce qui a trait à son choix de carrière : « il était vraiment de reculons là […]. Il faisait des exercices mais sans plus. Puis à la fin, c'était la personne qui était le plus en avant, c'est beau à voir. […] Puis il s'est arrêté sur un choix » (Isabelle, CO_G6_EI). Les personnes animatrices constatent également la mise en action des élèves par rapport à leurs projets scolaires et professionnels : « ça créé un momentum pour les mettre en action sur leur projet d'avenir. Il y en a un, il y en a une qui est déjà inscrite à un DEP » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI).

Le plan d'action, vers la fin des rencontres de groupe, a été apprécié et aidant pour les élèves, qui étaient particulièrement investis : « le plan d'action […], je pense que c'est une des fois que je les ai vus le plus travailler » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Cette activité a amené les élèves à mettre concrètement leur projet à l'écrit, permettant de clarifier certains éléments et de susciter certaines prises de conscience : « il y a comme une prise de conscience […] soit que ça peut créer un vent de panique, mais pour certains, ça fait : " Ah, bien oui, c'est là que je m'en vais " »; « quand il l'a mis en plan d'action, il a fait : « Ah, avec un peu de recul, peut-être que ce n'est pas tout possible »; « Fait que, tu sais… ça, ça a été, je te dirais, un élément déclencheur majeur dans leur réflexion » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). La personne animatrice explique : « Ce que j'ai observé avec le plan d'action, c'est que, justement : « Bien ok, je le mets sur papier, c'est clair où je m'en vais, puis là parfois, je me rends peut-être compte de certaines incohérences, ou peut-être pas, mais parfois oui » (Laurence, CO_G8_EI). Certains élèves nomment durant les rencontres les prises de conscience suscitées par le plan d'action : « ça me fait réaliser où je suis en ce moment. […] Qu'est-ce qui reste à faire. […] ça me permet d'enligner quelque chose » (Élève, G6_R8).

Si ce ne sont pas tous les élèves qui parviennent à un choix de carrière et un plan d'action défini à la fin du programme, des retombées positives pour l'anxiété sont néanmoins ressorties :

> Je trouve juste le fait d'être en action toute la semaine, ça a diminué (l'anxiété) […] il y en a un qui a dit : « Ça a diminué mon anxiété, comme je suis moins anxieux » […] Ça a un impact sur le fait de : « Ok, on parle de ce sujet-là toutes les semaines pendant neuf semaines, pas juste une fois dans l'année ou deux fois dans l'année, de manière aléatoire. Il y a quelque chose du fait qu'on est rentré dans un processus qui fait cheminer d'une manière ou d'une autre. (Marie, CO_G10-11_EI)

Certains élèves l'ont d'ailleurs nommé durant les rencontres de groupe : « Mon anxiété est beaucoup moins élevée » (Élève, G8_R8); « je ne sais pas toujours pas où je veux aller. Mais il y a un côté positif là-dedans, c'est que […] je ressens moins d'anxiété » (Élève, G10_R9).

Discussion

L'objectif de cet article était d'identifier les principaux éléments du contexte et du contenu du programme HORS-PISTE Orientation à adapter pour s'assurer de répondre aux besoins des jeunes autistes. L'implantation du programme auprès de quatre groupes révèle que bien que HORS-PISTE Orientation n'aie pas été développé pour les jeunes autistes, il répond à un besoin pour ceux-ci. De fait, il n'existe pas de programmes d'intervention se penchant précisément sur l'enjeu de l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière chez les adolescent.e.s, qu'ils soient autistes ou non (Dupuis et al., 2021). Somme toute l'implantation du programme confirme la nécessité d'adapter le programme existant afin de répondre aux besoins de cette nouvelle population.

Les résultats démontrent que l'intervention proposée présente plusieurs avantages pour les jeunes autistes ayant participé à HORS-PISTE Orientation. Le groupe représente un espace de création et de développement relationnel pour les jeunes, qui ont l'occasion, dans un premier temps, d'établir et de renforcer une relation avec la CO qui anime le programme. Il s'agit d'un élément positif identifié par les

CO, qui remarquent que le fait d'accompagner les élèves sur une base régulière plutôt que ponctuelle est aidante en ce sens. Les CO soulignent avoir l'impression de mieux connaître leurs élèves, ce qui facilite leur accompagnement, permettant ainsi de mieux comprendre les besoins spécifiques de leur population d'élèves (Rumrill et al., 2023). Elles remarquent également que leur présence semble sécurisante dans le groupe, ce qui encourage les élèves à se mettre en action, en cohérence avec ce que Dupuis (2024) a observé dans l'animation du programme auprès d'autres populations. Les résultats montrent également le renforcement des liens existants entre les personnes participantes, qui sont dans un même groupe-classe. Or, il semble que la participation au programme ait permis la création d'un espace de partage du vécu qui n'est pas nécessairement présent dans leur vie quotidienne. De fait, Weiss et Lunsky (2010) soulignent que le petit groupe peut permettre aux jeunes autistes de vivre une expérience unique de socialisation et de compensation des défis rencontrés sur le plan des relations sociales. Le groupe semble avoir aussi avoir favorisé la normalisation de la situation d'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière, ainsi que le soutien entre les élèves à ce sujet, ce qui avait également été observé précédemment par Dupuis (2024).

L'animation du programme auprès de jeunes autistes semble se distinguer sur le plan du développement des compétences sociales des personnes participantes. En effet, les CO remarquent une évolution dans la capacité à participer de façon continue dans le groupe, ce qui peut représenter un défi pour certains jeunes autistes. Ce résultat est cohérent avec plusieurs écrits, qui soulignent que l'intervention en petit groupe auprès de cette population peut favoriser le développement de compétences sociales (Gates et al., 2017; Laugeson et al., 2014, 2015; Levy et Dunsmuir, 2020; Mackay et al., 2007). Un autre élément souligné sur ce plan est l'importance d'intégrer des personnes adultes qui connaissent bien les personnes participantes, dans le cas présent des personnes enseignantes et TES. Les résultats montrent l'importance de leur présence et leur participation au programme, alors qu'elles peuvent enrichir les discussions compte tenu de ce qu'elles connaissent des élèves, mais jouent également un rôle de soutien important dans la gestion du groupe et des comportements perturbateurs. Il est d'ailleurs reconnu par les personnes autistes que la présence de personnes intervenantes peut favoriser les échanges en groupe, en plus d'apporter un soutien dans la gestion de la dynamique (Weiss et Lunsky, 2010).

Cela dit, la littérature recensée souligne davantage le rôle des parents en tant qu'experts de leur enfant. Il est donc fréquemment recommandé de les impliquer activement dans le processus vocationnel, afin de favoriser la généralisation des apprentissages (Miller et al., 2014; Reaven, 2012). Leur participation permet également de soutenir et d'encourager le jeune, tout en veillant à ce que les projets envisagés soient réalistes et adaptés aux capacités de leur enfant (Chun, 2024; Lee et Carter, 2012; Rumrill, 2023). Dans le contexte scolaire, les résultats obtenus suggèrent que les personnes enseignantes ou techniciennes en éducation spécialisée (TES) peuvent représenter une alternative intéressante à cet égard. Une rencontre avec les parents pourrait aussi être envisagée pour les impliquer davantage dans le processus d'orientation de leur enfant.

Outre l'aspect relationnel, plusieurs éléments positifs de l'animation de HORS-PISTE Orientation auprès de jeunes autistes sont présentés dans les résultats. De fait, il semble que la participation au programme ait permis à plusieurs jeunes de cheminer dans leur processus de choix de carrière, mais également dans leur capacité à comprendre et agir sur l'anxiété. En ce sens, la durée du programme serait un atout, alors qu'elle permet aux jeunes de réfléchir à ce sujet, mais également de réaliser des prises de conscience et de se mettre en action, ce qu'une CO décrit comme la création d'un *momentum*. L'étude de Miller et al. (2014) va dans le même sens, alors qu'elle souligne que les programmes plus longs présentent des retombées plus importantes. Pendant la durée du programme, les jeunes ont l'occasion d'acquérir différentes connaissances en ce sens, mais également de réaliser des activités concrètes. Ces dernières permettent la mise en activité des connaissances et outils transmis, ce qui facilite leur acquisition (Dupuis, 2024). Cette tangibilité serait particulièrement importante auprès de jeunes autistes, comme démontré précédemment par d'autres études (Moore et David, 2010; Reaven et al., 2012).

Si plusieurs éléments positifs de l'animation du programme auprès de jeunes autistes ressortent des résultats, plusieurs défis sont également identifiés. Sur le plan relationnel, les CO soulignent la difficulté d'établir une dynamique de groupe auprès de cette population, alors que cela peut demander un temps plus important. Ceci est cohérent avec la littérature existante, qui précise que les relations sociales et les situations de groupe peuvent être difficiles à naviguer pour les jeunes autistes (Gates et al., 2017; Laugeson et al., 2014,

2015; Levy et Dunsmuir, 2020; Mackay et al., 2007). Également, le fait que les élèves se situent à différents endroits sur le spectre de l'autisme a complexifié l'établissement de cette dynamique, alors que certains semblaient confortables dans un contexte de groupe, mais d'autres moins. Cette hétérogénéité peut représenter un obstacle important dans l'animation des groupes, comme montré dans la littérature existante (Chun et al., 2024; Simione et al., 2024; Stichter et al., 2019). Le fait d'animer le programme auprès de groupe-classes déjà formés depuis plusieurs mois peut également être un facteur à considérer, alors que des relations existaient entre les personnes participantes préalablement à leur participation à HORS-PISTE Orientation. Or, Gladding (2020) explique que les relations préalables – impliquant parfois des sous-groupes – peuvent compliquer l'animation et l'établissement d'une dynamique de groupe. Les actions qui peuvent perturber la dynamique du groupe (p. ex. rires, bavardages, non-participation) se sont aussi révélées être un défi pour les personnes animatrices. Si ces éléments ne sont pas uniques aux groupes menés auprès de jeunes autistes (Gladding, 2020; Leclerc, 2024), ils représentent néanmoins un enjeu à considérer compte tenu des besoins relationnels de ceux-ci.

La décision d'offrir le programme à l'ensemble du groupe-classe, sans égard à leur désir de participer a aussi pu jouer en ce sens, alors que l'aspect volontaire de la participation est habituellement un facteur associé au succès d'un groupe (Gladding, 2020). L'aspect non volontaire de la participation a pu renforcer l'hétérogénéité par rapport aux besoins des jeunes par rapport à l'anxiété en situation de choix de carrière. De fait, certaines personnes participantes avaient déjà réalisé leur choix de carrière, ce qui diminuait l'apport du programme pour elles. À l'inverse, certains jeunes ne ressentaient pas le besoin de travailler l'anxiété, alors qu'ils étaient accompagnés depuis longtemps pour leur anxiété et ont donc une connaissance suffisante pour comprendre et agir sur l'anxiété ressentie. Par ailleurs, un autre enjeu touche la tangibilité des activités. En effet, même si la majorité des activités prévues au programme sont concrètes, quelques-unes demandent une capacité d'abstraction, notamment celles portant sur le vécu affectif, ce qui semble avoir été plus difficile pour plusieurs personnes participantes. Les résultats montrent des défis de compréhension ou d'introspection chez plusieurs élèves, ce qui est cohérent avec les données rapportées par Reaven et al. (2012). Cette étude rapporte que la difficulté des jeunes autistes avec l'imagination et la régulation des émotions peut complexifier les interventions portant sur l'anxiété auprès de cette population.

Les activités de pleine conscience seraient également un enjeu pour plusieurs des personnes participantes, notamment en raison de difficultés de concentration ou de l'hypersensibilité associée à l'autisme. Cette hypersensibilité peut notamment se traduire par une complexification de la perception, de la compréhension et de l'engagement dans certaines activités chez les jeunes autistes (Vanheule et al., 2023). Or, plusieurs études démontrent que l'intégration d'ateliers de pleine conscience dans des programmes d'intervention groupale a généralement des effets positifs sur les jeunes autistes (Kerns et al., 2019; Simione et al., 2024). Simione et al. (2024) soulignent néanmoins que ces études ont été menées auprès de jeunes autistes considérés comme hautement fonctionnels, ce qui n'est pas nécessairement le cas ici. Une autre hypothèse d'explication des résultats obtenus est le fait que les personnes CO ne soient pas spécialistes de la pleine conscience, ce qui a pu affecter leur habileté à accompagner les jeunes dans les ateliers de pleine conscience (Khoury et Lecompte, 2016). En outre, Khoury et Lecomte (2016) soulignent que la durée du programme et la durée consacrée à la pratique de la pleine conscience affectent son efficacité. Dans le cadre d'HORS-PISTE Orientation cet outil est abordé comme une initiation à cette pratique, ce qui limite ses effets, mais pourrait gagner à être approfondi.

Ainsi, il semble que l'animation du programme HORS-PISTE Orientation présente plusieurs avantages dans l'intervention auprès de jeunes autistes, mais également des défis importants, particulièrement en considérant la diversité des profils des élèves autistes. Compte tenu des résultats obtenus dans cet article, l'équipe de recherche compte poursuivre l'adaptation du programme, autant sur le plan du contexte que du contenu. Les éléments qui ont été identifiés comme aidants seront maintenus et renforcés. Par exemple, l'opportunité d'interagir et de se soutenir en groupe sur une certaine durée semble avoir majoritairement des retombées positives, tout comme l'occasion de créer une relation entre les CO et les élèves. Également, un effort sera réalisé afin de conserver les activités concrètes, mais également d'en ajouter. La version adaptée du programme proposera systématiquement des alternatives concrètes aux ateliers abstraits. Par exemple, pour l'atelier de la montagne – nommé plusieurs fois en exemple dans les résultats – il pourra être proposé

de plutôt attribuer un chiffre de 1 à 10, ou un mot descripteur, quant à leur capacité actuelle à réaliser un choix de carrière. Dans le même sens, des alternatives seront proposées pour remplacer les ateliers de pleine conscience, si les personnes animatrices ne sont pas suffisamment formées pour les animer. Deux grandes recommandations seront aussi formulées pour les CO souhaitant implanter le programme auprès de jeunes autistes. Les personnes CO seront encouragées à intégrer la personne enseignante ou TES qui accompagne généralement le groupe à l'animation du programme. Il leur sera également recommandé de former les groupes de façon volontaire, et de s'assurer d'avoir des jeunes se situant à des endroits similaires sur le spectre de l'autisme.

Conclusion

Cet article permet de mettre de l'avant les aspects aidants et les défis d'animer un programme de counseling de carrière groupal auprès de jeunes autistes. Il démontre la possibilité réelle d'intégrer des jeunes autistes à des petits groupes d'intervention, malgré les enjeux qui peuvent y être associés. Les résultats obtenus permettent de guider les adaptations au contexte et au contenu (Sitrman et al., 2013) qui seront apportées au programme HORS-PISTE Orientation pour son animation auprès de jeunes autistes. Plus largement, ils peuvent fournir certaines lignes directrices à considérer dans le développement ou dans l'adaptation de programmes de counseling groupal auprès de cette population. L'enregistrement intégral des rencontres, de même que les entretiens de suivi avec les personnes animatrices a permis d'avoir un accès privilégié à l'activité des groupes (Dupuis et al., 2025) et d'avoir à la fois un accès direct et indirect à ce qui se passe dans les groupes et peut nécessiter une adaptation. L'étude menée présente néanmoins certaines limites, notamment en raison de la taille limitée de l'échantillon. En outre, les groupes étaient formés en majorité de personnes autistes, mais des jeunes qui ne présentent pas ce diagnostic étaient aussi intégrés dans les groupes. Si Miller et al. (2014) soulignent que cela peut être un atout, il demeure que les résultats ont pu être influencés par cette réalité. Également, les personnes enseignantes et TES ont été intégrées de façon importante dans l'animation des groupes, mais pas les parents. Or, la littérature suggère que ces derniers peuvent représenter une ressource en ce sens (Miller et al., 2014). Cet élément sera ainsi à considérer dans les adaptations qui seront proposées. Le programme adapté sera éventuellement offert gratuitement aux CO qui souhaiteront l'utiliser et les travaux se poursuivent pour l'adapter à d'autres populations.

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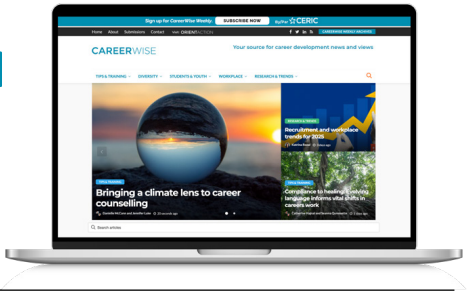

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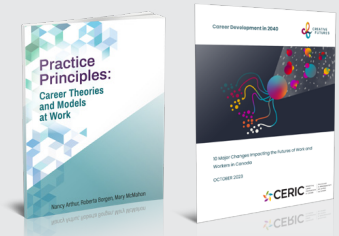

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Career Wellbeing Among Racialized Lawyers in Canadian Law Firms

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Abstract

The upward mobility of racialized lawyers within Canadian law firms continues to lag behind that of their White counterparts. While some progress has been made in recruitment, significant disparities remain in retention and promotion. This qualitative study explores how racialized lawyers experience working in Canadian law firms and how these experiences impact their career wellbeing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 racialized lawyers, and the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The themes identified were informed by existing literature on organizational dynamics and professional inequality and included tokenism processes (hypervisibility, role encapsulation and boundary heightening), bias (status expectations and homophily preferences) and organizational norms (professional and emotion), as well as several subthemes. These themes and subthemes were linked to diminished access to meaningful work, positive relationships with colleagues, career growth opportunities, perceived organizational support and autonomy—all core dimensions of career wellbeing. The findings reveal the cumulative psychological and structural burdens racialized lawyers face and underscore the need to embed equity into law firm culture in ways that meaningfully support career wellbeing, particularly amid increasing sociopolitical resistance to DEI efforts.

Keywords: career wellbeing, racialized lawyers, diversity, equity and inclusion, thematic analysis, tokenism, racial bias, organizational norms

In recent years, the issue of racial diversity within Canadian law firms has garnered significant attention. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many law firms made bold and public commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEI) and allocated substantial resources to recruiting more racial minorities and fostering a more inclusive working environment (National Association for Law Placement (NALP), 2020). These commitments signaled a long-overdue recognition of the structural barriers that have historically limited racialized professionals' access to and advancement within such institutions. Recently, however, the momentum behind DEI initiatives has faced increasing challenges. In the United States, political opposition and legal rulings have contributed to the scaling back or outright dismantling of DEI initiatives across sectors (Dollens & Sharperson, 2025; Goldberg et al., 2025; Weiss, 2025). This resistance is increasingly evident in Canada as well, where some organizations, including law firms, are retreating from their earlier commitments amid fears of reputational risk or ideological scrutiny (e.g. Carolino, 2025; Freeman, 2025).

Within this changing landscape, the legal profession stands at a crossroads. Law firms remain some of Canada's most homogenous and hierarchical institutions. Despite a steady increase in the number of racialized individuals entering the legal profession over the last decade, their upward mobility within Canadian law firms continues to lag behind that of their White counterparts. This persistent disparity has been linked to disproportionately high attrition rates among Canadian racialized lawyers (NALP Foundation, 2025)— a pattern similarly observed in the United States (American Bar Association, 2022; NALP Foundation, 2025). Notably, these trends have persisted despite the recent focus on DEI across the legal sector, raising critical questions about the efficacy of such efforts to date.

The present study uses the concept of career wellbeing to shed light on why racialized lawyers are leaving Canadian law firms at higher rates than White lawyers, contributing to underrepresentation within the highest ranks of Canadian law firms. Using a theory-driven thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with Canadian racialized lawyers, this study investigates how processes such as tokenism, bias, and organizational norms operate within law firm environments and affect racialized lawyers' access to resources that support career wellbeing. The findings contribute to a growing body of work advocating for more nuanced, relational, and psychologically informed approaches to inclusion in professional settings and offer insight into how inclusion efforts might be reimagined in an era of DEI backlash.

Career Wellbeing

Career wellbeing can be understood as the experience of positive affect in relation to one's career (Kidd, 2008). Unlike job satisfaction, which typically captures contentment with one's current role or work conditions at a specific point in time, career wellbeing encompasses a broader, longitudinal experience of purpose, growth, alignment with personal values, and relational support across the span of one's professional life. It reflects not only how satisfied someone feels in a given position, but whether their career as a whole contributes to their sense of identity, agency, and life satisfaction (Bester, 2019; Kidd, 2008). Poor career wellbeing is associated with lower levels of productivity, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and engagement as well as negative psychological and health effects such as increased stress, anxiety, depression and burnout (Agrawal & Harter, 2009; Burke, 2019; Somers et al., 2018). Consequently, employees experiencing poor career wellbeing are more likely to look for new opportunities outside of their current organization (Bester, 2019). As such, career wellbeing is a useful construct for understanding attrition intentions amongst employees.

Crucially, career wellbeing is not simply the outcome of individual choices or personality traits— it is also produced and constrained by broader structural, cultural, and relational forces within organizations. Research highlights five core organizational factors that influence career wellbeing: 1) access to meaningful work, 2) opportunities for career growth, 3) positive relationships with colleagues, 4) perceived organizational support and 5) autonomy (Kidd, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Access to meaningful work refers to the extent to which individuals find their tasks personally significant, worthwhile, and aligned with their values and interests (Rosso et al., 2010). Opportunities for career growth involve access to skill-building assignments, visibility-enhancing roles, mentorship, and pathways to advancement that allow employees to progress toward their professional goals (Kidd, 2008). Positive relationships with colleagues provide emotional support, information sharing, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to psychological safety and career development (Kim & Lee, 2009). Perceived organizational support reflects employees' beliefs that their employer values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing, often shaped by fair treatment, supervisor support, and investment in employee success through access to benefits and compensation (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Autonomy refers to the ability to exercise control over one's work and career path, including the freedom to make decisions and act authentically (Chen, 2017; Kirven, 2018). Together, these factors foster long-term engagement, fulfillment, and retention (Kidd, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Organizational Processes Influencing Career Wellbeing

This study also draws on several complementary lines of research that help explain how law firm environments may shape the experiences and, consequently, the career wellbeing of racialized lawyers. These include: (1) tokenism theory, which examines the consequences of numerical underrepresentation within organizations; (2) status expectations theory and homophily theory, which offer theoretical explanations for how certain forms of bias shape workplace interactions and evaluations; and (3) research on professionalism and emotion norms.

Originally developed in the context of gender representation, Kanter's (1977, 1978) theory of tokenism posits that individuals who are numerically underrepresented within organizations will experience a certain set of social processes: hypervisibility, boundary heightening and role encapsulation. Hypervisibility refers to the heightened scrutiny and surveillance token individuals face due to their numerical minority, which leads to increased performance pressure, as their missteps are more likely to be noticed by the majority group and seen as representative of both their abilities and the abilities of the entire token group. Boundary heightening occurs when majority group members exaggerate differences and reinforce social distance, often through exclusion from informal networks and cultural signaling that emphasizes the outsider status of tokens. Role encapsulation involves limiting token individuals to stereotyped roles or expectations based on their identity, which can undermine professional development and recognition. Role encapsulation can take the form of status leveling, whereby token group members are misidentified as individuals who hold lower-level jobs, and stereotyped role assignments, whereby token group members are assigned work due to their identity rather than their skills or interests. These processes have been linked to lower job satisfaction, increased psychological

distress, and increased turnover intentions for members of token groups (King et al., 2010; Settles et al., 2019). Importantly, research has demonstrated the importance of not only group size, but also of group status in how tokenism processes are experienced. Members of token groups are more likely to experience the negative effects of tokenism if they are part of a "low-status" groups (Yoder, 1991). As men and Whites have historically enjoyed higher social status in Western culture, they are generally considered members of "high-status" groups while women and non-Whites, are considered members of "low-status" groups (Ridgeway, 2014; Stroshine & Brandl, 2011).

In addition to the negative effects of tokenization, racialized professionals must navigate explicit and implicit biases that shape perceptions of their competence, legitimacy, and likeability in the workplace. Status expectations theory posits that individuals are evaluated within organizations not only on the basis of task-related credentials or demonstrated performance, but also through the lens of culturally shared, often unconscious beliefs about social group competence (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). These expectations are informed by ascribed characteristics such as race, gender, and age, that are not directly related to job performance but have acquired symbolic significance in broader societal hierarchies (Ridgeway, 2014).

Within Western professional contexts, including law, the intersection of Whiteness and masculinity continues to be culturally coded as indicative of authority, objectivity, and competence (Ridgeway, 2001). As a result, according to status expectations theory, racialized individuals, particularly women of colour, may be subject to lower baseline competence expectations, even when possessing equivalent or superior credentials to their White male peers (Ridgeway, 1997; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Consequently, racialized employees are often held to higher performance standards while receiving less recognition for their successes. These asymmetrical expectations can manifest in a number of subtle but cumulative disadvantages, such as being assigned less complex or lower-profile work, receiving less generous feedback, or being overlooked for advancement opportunities (Ridgeway, 2014; Roth, 2004).

Homophily preferences, the tendency for individuals to associate with those perceived to be similar to themselves (McPherson et al., 2001), can compound the effects of status expectations by influencing the formation of workplace relationships, networks, and support systems. In professional environments, similarity across visible social categories such as race, gender, and age often serves as a proxy for shared values, communication styles, and worldviews (Leszczensky & Pink, 2019; McPherson et al., 2001). Consequently, when organizational leadership and the dominant cultural milieu are predominantly White, racialized employees may find themselves excluded from informal social networks and relationship-based forms of professional capital (Taylor, 2010).

Organizational norms related to professionalism and the expression of emotion can also have a significant impact on the experiences of racialized employees. Professionalism is typically defined as the ability to demonstrate technical expertise and behavioural conduct (e.g. speech patterns and dress codes) that align with workplace expectations (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et., 2006). In Canada's legal profession, as in many elite white-collar fields, professionalism norms have been shaped by the historical overrepresentation of White, male professionals in leadership roles (Rosette et al., 2008). As a result, the markers of professionalism often align with White, Western cultural scripts.

For racialized professionals, especially those whose cultural identities diverge from these expectations, success may therefore require strategic identity management, such as "code-switching" (McCluney et al., 2019, 2021). Code-switching (i.e. altering speech, behaviours, or presentation to conform to dominant norms) can enhance perceived professionalism and increase access to opportunity and has long been a strategy used by racialized individuals to excel in White cultural spaces (Ibarra, 1995; Roberts, 2005). However, it also imposes emotional and psychological costs, including identity strain, reduced authenticity, and lower organizational commitment (Cha et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2019; Roulin & Krings, 2020).

Closely linked to professionalism norms are emotion norms—unwritten rules that govern which emotions can be expressed, to what extent, and by whom in workplace contexts (Hochschild, 2012; Wingfield, 2010). Professionals who are able to navigate emotion norms effectively are often perceived as more competent, promotable, and leadership-ready (Cha et al., 2019). However, these norms result in what Hochschild (2012) termed "emotional labour": the process of managing one's feelings to align with workplace expectations.

As emotion norms are typically shaped by the dominant workplace culture, they are racialized and gendered in ways that create different expectations for emotional expression for members of minority groups (Cox, 2016; Froyum, 2018; Wingfield, 2010). Consequently, for racialized professionals, emotional labour is intensified by the need to adhere to racialized "feeling rules"—differential expectations about emotional expression based on race (Cox, 2016; Wingfield, 2010). These constraints not only limit emotional authenticity but also increase psychological strain, contributing to lower job satisfaction (Sloan & Unnever, 2016). They also function as gatekeeping mechanisms that limit access to influence and advancement for those who cannot or choose not to conform. For example, Black professionals are often expected to suppress displays of anger or frustration to avoid being labeled as threatening or unprofessional, even in situations where White colleagues might express similar emotions without consequence (Harlow, 2003; Wingfield, 2010).

Methods

Participants

Participants were 19 English-speaking lawyers who, at the time of data collection, either currently (73.7%, *n* = 14) or previously (26.3%, *n* = 5) practiced law as licensed lawyers within Canadian law firms and self-identified as racialized. For the purposes of this study, the term "racialized" follows the definition of "visible minority" as outlined in Canada's Employment Equity Act (S.C. 1995, c. 44).

The sample reflected a diversity of demographic and professional backgrounds. Participants identified as female (63.2%, *n* = 12) or male (36.8%, *n* = 7). Age ranged from 25 to 44 years, with the largest group between 30–34 years (52.6%, *n* = 10). Racial/ethnic identities included Arab (15.8%, *n* = 3), Black (15.8%, *n* = 3), Chinese (36.8%, *n* = 7), Japanese (5.3%, *n* = 1), Korean (5.3%, *n* = 1), South Asian (10.5%, *n* = 2), and Other (10.5%, *n* = 2). These categories mirror those identified in the Employment Equity Act. Most participants were licensed in Ontario (94.7%, *n* = 18), while one participant was licensed in Alberta.

Most participants were currently practicing as lawyers within law firms (73.7%, *n* = 14), some had left private practice and were working as in-house lawyers (15.8%, *n* = 3), while others had left the practice of law altogether (10.5%, *n* =2). Participants held varying levels of seniority (either currently or immediately before leaving private practice): junior associate (26.3%, *n* = 5), mid-level associate (36.8%, *n* = 7), senior associate (26.3%, *n* = 5), and equity partner (10.5%, *n* = 2). It should be noted however, that those who identified as equity partners worked at firms that they personally founded. Participants worked in firms of different sizes: 2–10 lawyers (21.1%, *n* = 4), 11–50 lawyers (21.1%, *n* = 4), and over 50 lawyers (57.8%, *n* = 11). All participants reported that they currently or previously worked at a law firm where racialized lawyers were in the minority. Areas of practice spanned a wide range, including antitrust, criminal, environmental, finance, health, Indigenous, human rights, labour and employment, mergers and acquisitions, real estate, securities, and tax law. This demographic and professional diversity was key to ensuring the data captured both commonalities and divergences in experience across domains.

Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants whose identities and career paths reflected the varied backgrounds and professional experiences of racialized lawyers across Canada. Recruitment took place via social media (LinkedIn and Facebook) using a research poster. Prospective participants contacted the primary researcher by email and were screened for eligibility based on self-identified racialization, legal practice history and work experience in Canadian law firms. Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics board prior to participant recruitment.

Eligible participants were sent a consent form and demographic survey through REDCap. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide with 14 open-ended questions was used to explore themes related to firm culture, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, perceptions of DEI initiatives, and the perceived impact of race and identity on participants' career experiences and trajectories. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim

using a secure transcription service and manually reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were anonymized and stored on a secure, encrypted server. Participant recruitment began in December 2022 and data collection was completed in March 2023.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the primary author using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). A theory-driven, deductive approach was employed. That is, while theoretical concepts (e.g. tokenism) oriented the analysis, coding remained open to patterns that complicated, stretched, or challenged those concepts. Coding proceeded through repeated and immersive readings of the transcripts, during which the primary author generated codes that captured theoretically relevant features of participants' accounts. Candidate themes were developed by examining connections, tensions, and patterned meanings across codes, guided both by the theoretical aims of the study and the experiential depth of participants' narratives. These themes were refined to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and meaningful contribution to the research aims.

Reflexive practice was central throughout the analysis. The primary author engaged in ongoing reflexive memo writing and explicit reflection on their theoretical commitments and positionality—including the influence of being a former non-racialized lawyer interpreting racialized participants' experiences. As emphasized in the RTA literature, such reflexive engagement serves not to eliminate subjectivity but to make it visible and analytically productive, supporting more thoughtful and transparent meaning-making. For example, through reflexive practice, the primary author recognized that they may have been more attuned to structural and procedural dynamics within law firms than to the subtleties of navigating racialization in these spaces. This awareness served as an ongoing reflexive reminder that their interpretations were situated rather than neutral, and that certain experiential nuances may have been differently apprehended by a researcher with lived experience of racialization.

Results

Participants described a set of recurring and interrelated experiences that shaped their professional lives within Canadian law firms. These experiences were organized into six core themes. Each of the three tokenism processes—hypervisibility, boundary heightening, and role encapsulation—emerged as distinct themes. Within hypervisibility, two sub-themes were identified: performance pressure and coping mechanisms. Role encapsulation also included two sub-themes: status leveling and stereotyped role assignment. Two additional themes reflected forms of bias—status expectations and homophily preferences. Lastly, two themes related to organizational norms were identified: professionalism norms and emotion norms. Within these, code-switching emerged as a sub-theme of professionalism norms, while racialized feeling rules and emotion management were sub-themes of emotion norms. Together, these themes illustrated how racialized lawyers encountered unique interpersonal, institutional, and psychological pressures that affected not only their day-to-day work experiences but also their sense of legitimacy, belonging, and long-term career goals. Unless otherwise reported, no demographic (e.g. age, gender, race/ethnicity) or occupational (e.g. level of seniority, size of law firm) patterns were observed in the data.

Hypervisibility was among the most reported experiences by participants (n=18). The majority of the study's participants associated being a racialized lawyer with a strong sense of pride and achievement. However, they also described a persistent awareness of standing out and being perceived as different from the predominately White lawyers at their firms. Many (n=12) felt that such heightened visibility led to increased scrutiny of their performance. As a result, some participants felt as though any mistake they made could be potentially career-ending, which caused them intense stress and anxiety. One participant recalled how this pressure led them to develop significant mental health issues during their time at a law firm:

> I just felt that they would dissect what you do more. So, yeah, that extra pressure, that's kind of what led to all the anxiety and the binge eating and all that stuff because you're like, I can't mess up. I'm not afforded

> an opportunity to mess up because if I mess up once, I'm never gonna get another opportunity again. Like they're just never gonna send me any other work.

Participants also described feeling as though they needed to prove that they were hired or received opportunities due to their merit rather than their race. They felt that because they stood out as different from the majority of lawyers within their firm, it was often assumed that they were hired for diversity reasons. As a result, participants felt pressure to perform at a high level to demonstrate that they were equally as deserving of their position as those in the majority group. Several participants noted that the need to prove one's merit and the resulting performance pressure is never-ending for racialized lawyers – even once they are made partner – because there will always be an underlying question as to whether their success is due to their race rather than their abilities that can only be answered by producing excellent work. Some participants also described feeling performance pressure because of the symbolic consequences of their successes or failures within the firm. They worried that their shortcomings might be seen as representative of the abilities of other lawyers sharing their racial or ethnic background. Relatedly, several participants reported feeling both internal and external pressure to strive for partnership in order to be a positive role model for others that share their racial identity. As one participant put it: "[T]here's a lot of pressure - a lot of it internal, but some of it external, that you have to be the great hope for your specific identity".

Many participants (n=13) described engaging in emotionally costly coping strategies such as working significantly harder than their White peers to limit the occurrence of high-profile mistakes and dispel doubts about their merit or managing their visibility by avoiding behaviours that might reinforce their perceived "otherness," including asking for accommodations, seeking mental health support, or participating in racial affinity groups.

Boundary heightening further shaped participants' law firm experiences. Many participants (n=15) reported experiences of social exclusion within their predominantly White law firms, particularly in relation to informal professional and networking opportunities. Participants described how access to these opportunities was often mediated through cultural familiarity with activities typically associated with White, upper-middle-class male norms, such as attending sporting events, playing golf or engaging in alcohol-centered socializing. Several participants noted that they were either not invited to these events or were unable to fully participate due to cultural, religious, or experiential differences. They felt that this exclusion had tangible implications for business development and mentorship, as such events were frequently cited by participants as important venues for relationship-building with colleagues and clients.

In addition, participants reported challenges connecting with their White colleagues through common workplace small talk, which often centered around topics such as skiing, private schooling, fine dining, and European travel. While participants who reported being from higher-income backgrounds or more familiar with White cultural norms expressed some increased ease in navigating these spaces, many still felt that full integration remained elusive. Participants reflected that, unlike their White counterparts—including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—racialized lawyers were less likely to benefit from automatic inclusion, as their racial identity continued to mark them as distinct, even when many other social markers aligned. As one participant said:

> I think, ultimately, based on my experience, race matters more [than socio-economic status] because I've seen poor White kids make it just fine in this profession. They get by because as soon as they put a suit on, they look like everybody else.

Participants (n=13) also described experiences of role encapsulation. These experiences took the form of both status leveling (n=4), such as being mistaken for a non-lawyer or a more junior lawyer, and stereotyped role assignments (n=12), including being asked to participate in DEI initiatives, mentor only racialized associates or appear in promotional materials and client meetings to signal the firm's diversity. Notably, the experience of status-leveling was only reported by female participants. While many participants reported initially welcoming involvement in DEI-related initiatives, some later came to view this work as unrecognized and uncompensated labour that diverted time and energy from core legal responsibilities. Several participants

observed that by placing responsibility for improving diversity and inclusion within the firm on racialized lawyers, law firms reduced the burden of organizational change on White lawyers, who could presumably instead focus on their billable work. One participant explained:

> I was very encouraged by the management of the firm to take part in diversity related initiatives…but it was draining trying to do all of that work while also billing as much as was needed or even just putting in as much face time as was needed.

Other participants expressed frustration at being expected to serve as representatives or educators on diversity issues without formal expertise or institutional support and at continuously being paired with other racialized lawyers when they volunteered for mentorship or recruitment initiatives. Participants also recounted being assigned to files or client meetings based on perceived racial alignment, often without meaningful involvement in the legal work itself, leading some to feel tokenized and devalued. One participant stated that these experiences made them feel like a "circus animal". Cumulatively, these experiences reinforced the perception amongst many participants that their professional value was at times defined more by their racial identity than by their legal skills or contributions.

Several participants (n=5) described experiencing lower assumed competence in the workplace based on their race, consistent with status expectations. These participants reported feeling that they were not granted the same benefit of the doubt as their White colleagues regarding their abilities and, as a result, believed they needed to consistently exceed expectations to be seen as equally competent. They reflected on the need to deliver exceptional work to counteract lowered expectations and observed that racialized lawyers, particularly women, were held to a higher standard than White male colleagues. One participant shared: "[A]s a black woman, I do have to work twice as hard to get half as much. I have to be exceptional to be viewed as competent." This disparity was perceived as both unfair and emotionally taxing, with some participants expressing frustration that mediocre work by White peers was often rewarded, while racialized lawyers had to "sweat" to receive comparable recognition.

Many participants (n=12) shared how explicit or implicit bias reflective of homophily preferences shaped their experiences in law firms, particularly by limiting their ability to form relationships with White colleagues and superiors. Participants reported that White lawyers, especially senior ones, appeared more comfortable working with and mentoring individuals who looked like them or shared similar cultural backgrounds, resulting in racialized lawyers being overlooked for work, guidance and career development opportunities. As one participant put it:

> [P]artners often look out for people who look like them because they're like, oh, that's like the younger version of me. I wanna look out for this guy. It's often a White male. That's why there's so many White male partners.

Some participants shared that they had to go out of their way to demonstrate shared interests or compatibility with their White colleagues to gain access to these relationships, which felt unfair. Others noted that even when formal mentorship programs exist, the resulting relationships are often not as lasting or impactful as those forged informally and more easily between White lawyers. Participants felt that these dynamics made it more difficult for them to access key forms of support—such as career advice, work referrals, and sponsorship for partnership—and contributed to feelings of professional isolation and exhaustion. Several participants also explained that the lack of mentorship and meaningful connection with colleagues negatively impacted their career trajectories and mental health, with some ultimately leaving their firms as a result.

Another dominant theme raised by participants (n=15) was the influence of White cultural norms within law firms and how these norms shape expectations of professionalism and compel some racialized lawyers (n=14) to engage in code-switching to succeed. These participants described altering their speech, behaviour, and appearance to conform to these unspoken norms, which they associated with a White, upper-middle-class ideal. This self-monitoring was viewed as necessary to avoid being misjudged, stereotyped, or excluded, despite no one explicitly instructing them to do so. Many reported presenting a "whitewashed"

version of themselves, perceiving that their authentic identities might hinder their career advancement. As one participant explained:

> No one told me that I needed to whitewash myself. It was just [that based on] the impression that I had from fitting in at my school and from my entire life, I thought that this would be valued and required.

Participants described code-switching as emotionally taxing and a reflection of systemic pressures to assimilate in order to thrive within the legal profession. They reported that code-switching often resulted in feelings of inauthenticity, exhaustion, imposter syndrome and difficulty forming genuine workplace connections. For example, when asked about the cost of code-switching, one participant shared: "I would go home so tired and it wasn't always because of work. It was because I had to put on this personality, this front, that became exhausting on its own."

Several participants (n=7) also described how emotion norms within law firms are shaped by racialized expectations, particularly regarding assertiveness, expression of negative emotions, and discussions about diversity. While assertiveness is typically valued in legal practice, participants noted that when racialized lawyers displayed this trait, it was often misinterpreted as defiance or inappropriate anger. This double standard made it difficult for them to communicate authentically or respond to mistreatment without fear of backlash. Similarly, participants observed that White colleagues were afforded greater leeway to express negative emotions or dissatisfaction, while racialized lawyers felt compelled to suppress their feelings to avoid being perceived as unprofessional or threatening. This extended to conversations about diversity and inclusion issues, which participants felt could not be raised openly without risking defensiveness from their White colleagues. As a result, some racialized lawyers (n=5) engaged in significant emotion management to navigate these norms, describing this effort as psychologically exhausting and indicative of the unequal burdens placed on them in predominantly White law firms. As one participant explained: "If people say casually sexist things or casually racist things, then it's up to you to just be quiet and not make a noise about it."

Discussion

This study's findings suggest that the career wellbeing of racialized lawyers in Canadian law firms is undermined by a range of organizational and interpersonal dynamics that intersect with race, including tokenism processes, status expectations, homophily preferences, and racialized norms of professionalism and emotion. Although this was a qualitative study and, therefore, did not seek to measure career wellbeing directly, the data provide insight into how these organizational processes may compromise each of the five pillars of career wellbeing. Given the well-established links between career wellbeing and important outcomes such as motivation, turnover intentions, and psychological health (e.g. Creed & Blume, 2013; King et al., 2010), the challenges described by participants raise significant concerns about the sustainability and equity of legal careers for racialized lawyers.

With respect to access to meaningful work and opportunities for career growth, participants described how being positioned as "diversity lawyers" and representatives of their racial group often transformed potentially meaningful DEI work into burdensome, undervalued labour. Role encapsulation and hypervisibility meant that diversity-related tasks and representational duties were added to already demanding workloads, without the recognition or developmental value associated with billable legal work. At the same time, lower assumed competence and heightened scrutiny based on race undermined trust in their abilities and limited access to complex files. Exclusion from informal networks—often organized around White, upper-middle-class cultural practices—further constrained opportunities for high-profile assignments and sponsorship. Many participants who found it difficult to access meaningful work and desired career growth opportunities expressed feeling stressed, unmotivated and unsupported – emotions that are associated with poor career wellbeing (Agrawal & Harter, 2009; Creed & Blume, 2013; Kidd, 2008).

The themes also illuminate how the formation of positive relationships with colleagues, and in particular with senior lawyers and clients, are shaped by race. Boundary heightening and homophily preferences reduced the frequency and quality of contact between racialized and White lawyers, making it

harder to build the kinds of informal, trusting relationships that typically underpin mentorship, sponsorship, and access to developmental work. Professionalism and emotion norms, experienced as implicitly White and gendered, often required racialized lawyers to engage in ongoing code-switching and emotion management to be seen as competent and non-threatening. Participants linked this self-monitoring to inauthenticity, isolation, and emotional exhaustion, echoing prior research on authenticity, social support and wellbeing at work (e.g., Cha et al., 2019; Pullen et al., 2023; Sloan et al., 2013). Together, these dynamics help explain why many participants experienced limited social support and weaker attachment to their firms, despite formal diversity commitments.

Perceived organizational support was similarly shaped by racialized patterns of opportunity and recognition, which signalled to participants that they had to work harder than their White colleagues to be seen as equally competent and that advancement decisions might not be based on merit alone. Limited access to influential mentors and sponsors as well as isolation and exclusion driven by homophily preferences, status expectations, boundary heightening and the difficulties of forming authentic relationships under code-switching and emotion management expectations, further weakened their sense that their firm was invested in their long-term success. Some participants also believed that time spent on non-billable, diversity-related work and challenges accessing billable files negatively affected compensation and progression, aligning with broader evidence of racial pay gaps in the Canadian legal profession (Canadian Bar Association, 2020, 2021). While none of the participants suggested that they were formally ineligible for the same rewards and benefits as their White colleagues, efforts to manage their visibility led some to forgo certain supports, including mental health services offered by their firms. This self-limiting use of benefits further constrained the practical support available to them and subtly weakened perceptions that the organization was a reliable source of care. These patterns are consistent with research showing that perceived unfairness and lack of support from superiors undermine perceived organizational support and, in turn, career wellbeing (Kidd, 2008; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Finally, the findings highlight constraints on autonomy, particularly self-endorsed functioning. Performance pressures linked to hypervisibility meant that some participants felt unable to change practice areas, reduce hours, or leave unsupportive firms without risking the reputation of their racial group or disappointing others who saw them as role models. Behavioural expectations grounded in emotion and professionalism norms also led several participants to feel that they could not present themselves authentically or challenge problematic behaviour by others without jeopardizing their careers. Their accounts support existing research demonstrating that, because racial code-switching continually reinforces White norms and culture as the standard for professionalism, both racialized and White professionals come to view such behaviours as an expected and often necessary pathway to advancement (McCluney et al., 2021). Consistent with the existing literature (e.g. Cha et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2013; Madera et al., 2012), participants associated these challenges with negative psychological consequences such as stress and feelings of inauthenticity, expressed discontent with their careers and uncertainty about or disinterest in continuing to work at a law firm or in the legal professional as a whole.

Implications and Recommendations

This study illustrates how the key organizational drivers of career wellbeing can be undermined for racialized lawyers within Canadian law firms, shedding light on why racialized lawyers tend to leave law firms at higher rates than their White counterparts. The results of this study also carry important implications for the individuals and institutions seeking to support the career wellbeing of racialized lawyers. For career development professionals, the results highlight the need to be equipped to recognize, affirm and address the structural and psychological realities that racialized lawyers face. Career support for these individuals should include helping them to engage in value-aligned career planning, articulate boundaries, assess cultural fit and navigate environments that may not be supportive of or aligned with their personal and professional identities. Positioning career conversations within an understanding of tokenism, bias, and racialized professionalism and emotion norms can enhance practitioners' ability to effectively prepare racialized lawyers for the complex interpersonal and institutional landscapes they may encounter within law firms.

For law firm management, this study underscores that the promotion of career wellbeing for racialized lawyers requires firms to examine and restructure how opportunity is distributed and potential is recognized. Instituting transparent work distribution systems, formalized sponsorship and equity-informed performance reviews can promote fairness. Treating DEI work as essential organizational labour and ensuring that it is institutionally resourced, equitably distributed and explicitly recognized in performance and promotion evaluations can help to ensure that racialized lawyers who choose to participate in these programs are not unintentionally disadvantaged for their contributions. Redefining leadership and competence to include diverse styles of communication and expression can help reduce some of the additional psychological burdens carried by racialized lawyers. Finally, given increasing backlash to DEI efforts in North America, law firms must prepare for resistance without retreating. Framing DEI efforts in terms of transparency, consistency, and organizational excellence can help build broader support. Ultimately, however, law firm leaders must be prepared to defend DEI as a core component of career wellbeing, talent retention, and institutional legitimacy. This means aligning DEI with the firm's long-term success and embedding it within every layer of organizational life.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study advances understanding of how racialized lawyers experience working within Canadian law firms, it is also subject to several limitations and highlights a number of directions for future research. First, its findings may have limited generalizability due to the small participant sample. Expanding the sample size would enhance generalizability and could also allow exploration into how race may interact with multiple other identities (e.g. gender, socio-economic status, age) to affect career wellbeing. Second as this study used a single-analyst design, findings represent an interpretive, situated reading of the data by the primary author. In RTA, theme development is understood as a creative and subjective process rather than a technical procedure aimed at coder agreement. Inter-rater reliability and consensus coding are not, therefore, epistemologically consistent with RTA and a single-analyst design is not considered problematic. At the same time, this design means that the themes reflect one possible account of participants' experiences.

Third, the study employed a largely deductive analytic orientation. This approach is a strength in that it enabled a focused, in-depth examination of how established constructs manifest in the careers of racialized lawyers and allowed the analysis to speak directly to existing theoretical debates. However, a deductive frame may also have constrained analytic openness and limited the visibility of patterns that did not fit easily within the chosen theoretical scaffolding. Although the analysis remained attentive to unanticipated insights, more inductive applications of RTA might surface different or additional themes.

Fourth, the interviews capture the perceptions of participants at one moment in time. As career wellbeing reflects an individual's satisfaction with their career over the long term, longitudinal research is needed to understand how racialized lawyers' perceptions of their careers evolve over time. Fifth, while the interview protocol was not specifically designed to elicit the recollection of negative experiences from participants, the way that the questions were phrased may have biased participants to sharing such experiences (and in fact, a small number of participants raised this issue to the primary researcher). It is, therefore, possible that the composition of the interview questions resulted in this study generating more examples of negative law firm experiences. Finally, the interviews were conducted prior to the most recent wave of political backlash against DEI initiatives. A follow-up study using the same participants would be helpful in understanding whether and how the new political environment within North America has shaped the experiences of racialized lawyers working in Canadian law firms.

Conclusion

This study offers a contextually rich and theoretically grounded account of how racialized lawyers experience their careers within Canadian law firms. The findings reveal how subtle, cumulative and culturally embedded forms of exclusion undermine core components of career wellbeing. These dynamics help explain ongoing patterns of attrition among racialized lawyers despite the growing numbers of racialized lawyers

entering the profession. This research also highlights the resilience, agency and vision of racialized lawyers who strive to align their work with their values and identities. Their stories illustrate that career wellbeing requires institutional accountability, cultural alignment, and relational safety.

Although the study was conducted during a period of heightened DEI attention and support, its findings remain especially relevant in the current climate of political and institutional revaluation and rejection of DEI efforts. The data make clear that even when formal diversity policies and initiatives are in place, deep-rooted inequities often persist. This is, in part, because many such policies do not address the underlying dynamics that shape daily work experiences such as exclusion from informal networks, racialized emotion norms or assumptions about competence. While the current backlash to DEI makes it more difficult for firms to introduce or revise initiatives to address these experiences, this study shows that DEI policies alone are not the only path forward. Law firms can still foster cultures where openness, difference and critical discourse are welcomed and rewarded—where the conditions for psychological safety, belonging, and professional flourishing are built into everyday practice. These cultural shifts can go a long way to addressing the deeper drivers of exclusion and improving the career wellbeing and, consequently the retention, of racialized lawyers.

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Navigating Multiple Careers: Enhancing Vocational Well-Being in Moonlighters

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Abstract

Moonlighting—defined as multiple job holding—has seen a significant increase, especially among young adults aged 25-34 in North America, with prevalent sectors being healthcare, social assistance, and education. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted moonlighting trends, prompting remote work popularity. Despite financial motivations, young adults engage in moonlighting for personal growth and skill acquisition. Moonlighters, however, face challenges such as poor work-life balance, role and identity conflicts, and emotional distress. To address these challenges, this article proposes career helping interventions based on happenstance learning theory and Cochran's narrative career counselling, aiming to enhance vocational well-being among young moonlighters in North America.

Keywords: Moonlighting, multiple job holding, vocational well-being, career counselling intervention, happenstance learning theory, narrative career theory

Moonlighting, or multiple job holding, exists in labour markets in both developing and developed countries (Dickey et al., 2011). Moonlighting refers to engaging in a secondary job or multiple jobs in addition to an individual's primary employment. Multiple job holders can be paid employees or self-employed, working full-time, part-time, or any combination thereof (Fulford & Patterson, 2019). Moonlighting is permitted in the United States and Canada, and the trend in North America has seen an increase in recent decades. In particular, significant growth has occurred in the moonlighting population among women in Canada, rising from approximately 2.4% in 1978 to 5% in 1998 (Sussman, 1998). According to Statistics Canada, in 2019 the most common sectors for moonlighting among women were health care, social assistance, and educational services (Fulford & Patterson, 2019). This trend has continued into 2023, with the top moonlighting sectors in Canada continuing to be those where most workers are women (Statistics Canada, 2024). As of 2019, the Canadian prevalence rate of moonlighting among both men and women was 30%, 3 times higher than in 2011 (Glavin, 2020). In the United States, between 5% and 35% of the working population holds at least 1 part-time job in addition to a primary full-time job. As of 2019, this trend has continued to rise steadily across various fields, including information technology (IT), engineering, and teaching (Campion et al., 2019).

In the past 3 years, many people have experienced financial constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic, including job loss and income insecurity. Despite a slight drop in Canadian moonlighting rates in 2020, they rapidly increased again in 2021 (Asravor, 2021; Clarke & Fields, 2022). As of 2023, this trend has continued, with the percentage of Canadians holding more than 1 job increasing by 0.1% from 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Following lockdowns, both the United States and Canadian governments initiated recovery measures, focusing on industry-level jobs, labour participation rates, and overall labour market conditions. This triggered a swift and significant change in work patterns, with remote jobs and work-from-home options becoming popular choices, particularly in IT, teaching, and administration. This shift significantly contributes to the long-term implications of moonlighting (Mark et al., 2022). Statista research in the United States reported 48.7 million remote workers by May 2020, and this trend has continued to accelerate in recent years (Statista, 2023). The proportion of remote workers has more than tripled, increasing from 7.4% in 2016 to 24.3% in 2021. Moreover, many moonlighters now have a remote part-time job while holding another full-time job. According to Statistics Canada (Morissette et al., 2023), the remote work model is a contributing factor to the rising trends of moonlighting.

In North America, moonlighting is most common among young adults in their 20s and 30s (5.0%), who have consistently exhibited the highest rate compared to adults aged 36–50 (4.1%) and those over 50 (3.6%) in the past 2 decades (Fulford & Patterson, 2019). As of 2023, 6.6% of young Canadian adults moonlight, compared to 5.8% of middle-aged adults and 4.4% of those over 55 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Some research

suggests that individuals expecting to moonlight often cite ongoing motivations. These include financial hardship, the desire to explore new skills, and gaining experience in alternative occupations to prepare for new roles (Dickey et al., 2011; Malik & Menal Dahiya, 2023; Panos et al., 2014).

Moonlighters aged 25–34 also face several challenges affecting their overall career well-being. They often experience poor work-life balance, juggling different roles and responsibilities, and emotional exhaustion leading to lowered job satisfaction and overall vocational well-being (Dodanwala et al., 2021; Hämmig, 2018; Vyas & Shrivastava, 2017). Because research on moonlighting between ages 25 and 34 is limited, this article identifies common career issues for these individuals. Using happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009) and Cochran's narrative career counselling theory (Cochran, 1997), the article explores career interventions and counselling strategies to help young moonlighters enhance their vocational wellness.

Career Issues in Moonlighting

This section will discuss 3 major career issues faced by young moonlighters: poor work-life balance, role and identity conflict, and emotional distress and burnout. Work-life challenges addressed include less time for family, friends, and leisure; working during holidays; and poor work satisfaction. Issues of role and identity conflict in young moonlighters will also be explored, in particular the ways in which navigating multiple professional identities can complicate the construction of a coherent narrative of professional identity. Finally, the emotional distress and burnout associated with moonlighting in young adults, and potential contributing factors such as student loan debt, will be discussed.

Poor Work–Life Balance

The most common challenges faced by young moonlighters involve maintaining work-life balance. Sirgy and Lee (2017) introduced a holistic definition of work-life balance, emphasizing a high level of role engagement in both work and nonwork life, with minimal conflicts between these roles. Nonwork life encompasses family life, social life, leisure activities, spiritual pursuits, and community engagement. Balancing multiple jobs can pose challenges in managing work and nonwork life, potentially affecting career performance and overall well-being. However, according to Byrne (2005), young individuals conceptualize work-life balance differently from traditional concepts, seeking more productive work conditions, adapting to new technologies, taking on greater responsibility, experiencing a sense of ownership, and avoiding bringing problems from home to work. They also value time for personal growth, social connections, and life outside of work.

Despite these preferences, young moonlighters encounter challenges in balancing work and life due to their longer working hours compared to single jobholders. This results in less time available for family, friends, leisure activities, and relaxation (Vyas & Shrivastava, 2017). According to a report from Statistics Canada in 2018 (Fulford & Patterson, 2019), multiple jobholders work an average of 45.9 hours per week across all jobs, significantly exceeding the work hours of single jobholders (36.1 hours per week). Recent estimates suggest that young moonlighters in the United States work an average of 46.8 hours per week, compared to the average young employee working 38.6 hours per week (Webster et al., 2018). Additionally, many moonlighting jobs require work outside normal business hours (9–5). They may involve working on weekends, overnight or during holidays, especially in roles related to education, customer service, driving, and industrial warehouses. This can significantly impact the availability of time for social connections, family activities, and participation in important holidays or cultural events. Young moonlighters may find spending holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving with family or friends challenging, potentially resulting in social exclusion, loneliness, and a lower level of life satisfaction (Achterbergh et al., 2020).

Studies suggest this issue is salient for young moonlighters who are seeking economic stability (Dickey et al., 2011). Hamel (1967) demonstrated that income plays a crucial role in workers having dual jobs. If primary job earnings rise, the likelihood of moonlighting decreases, and vice versa. Economic hardship, coupled with limited earnings from the primary job, compels many young adults to seek additional employment, making moonlighting a survival strategy for those in relatively low-income households. Having multiple sources of income not only provides financial stability and flexibility but also helps individuals reach

their financial goals faster. Likewise, the drastic changes in labour market conditions over the past 3 decades, driven by increased globalization, declining unionization, student loan debt, and the failure of the minimum wage to keep up with inflation, have made young adults work extensive hours (Danziger & Ratner, 2010).

The long working hours associated with moonlighting can blur the boundaries between work and personal time. Moonlighters might not be able to adhere to consistent work-life boundaries and manage work-work boundaries between multiple jobs. When conflicts arise between work commitments and nonwork life, a negative spillover effect can significantly impact work satisfaction and the quality of nonwork life (Kelliher et al., 2018). Furthermore, long work hours may lead to excessive energy expenditure, resulting in various physical reactions such as fatigue, distress, and compromised sleep quality, ultimately affecting the time available for family and friends (Hsu et al., 2019). In contrast, younger employees with consistent work hours, breaks, and weekends are more likely to experience predictability and have time available for personal activities, contributing to a better work-life balance (Hill et al., 2001).

Despite being remote, many moonlighting jobs may not eliminate the challenges associated with work-life balance. Even when working from home, individuals report that moonlighting blurs the boundaries between work and personal time, and difficulties related to sleep can be attributed to the inability to detach from work (Kinnunen et al., 2017). Additionally, some young individuals are eager to pursue personal growth by expanding their hobbies and acquiring new skills to enrich their lives, even if they are not experiencing immediate negative financial shocks (Malik & Menal Dahiya, 2023). Moonlighting also offers opportunities for young individuals to gain experience in different fields, increase their knowledge, build portfolios, and positively impact productivity. This includes developing technician skills, soft skills, industry-specific knowledge, analytical skills, video-editing skills, and graphic design skills. Young individuals often seek to pursue their passion or creative endeavours, building confidence, challenging themselves, and achieving a sense of accomplishment—fulfillment not commonly derived from their primary job. They are also more likely than others to experience life imbalance. They are too focused on career, which results in ignoring their leisure activities and self-care, such as inadequate sleep and less available time for friends and family, negatively impacting their vocational well-being (Jahangir & Tahseen, 2023).

Role and Identity Conflict in Young Moonlighters

According to Erikson's identity development theory (1959), identity development is an ongoing process throughout the lifespan. Young adults aged 25 to 34 are expected to undergo 2 stages of identity development: establishing intimacy and relationships with others and contributing to society while being part of a family. Career development plays a crucial role in this, leading to maturity and stability during early adulthood. This period is marked by significant identity exploration, including career choices, decisions, work experiences, and autonomy. However, young moonlighters may experience role and identity conflicts, stemming from challenges in balancing different roles, managing boundaries, and integrating various aspects of personal and professional identities.

Research indicates that young people's work experiences contribute to shaping their future work-related attitudes, values, motivations, and behaviours (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). A report from the Pew Research Centre (Leppert, 2023) demonstrated that around 44% of young workers expressed satisfaction with their first primary job, which was lower than the satisfaction reported by older workers aged 50–64. Koen et al. (2012) reported that young adults were more likely to struggle to construct a positive work-related identity when transitioning from study to employment. Young adults aged 25–34 just starting in their careers are more likely to see moonlighting as a conduit for obtaining new skills and expertise, even though multiple job holding may take away valuable time that could be spent with family and friends, socializing, or pursuing other interests (Malik & Menal Dahiya, 2023).

Working multiple jobs creates conflicting demands in terms of time, responsibilities, and expectations for young adults. This impacts their ability to simultaneously meet each job's expectations and potentially affects job satisfaction. Studies also show that young workers are vulnerable to role conflicts due to a lack of life skills and experiences to cope with them, leading to job distress (Dodanwala et al., 2021). Therefore, young moonlighters working in 2 or more jobs are more likely than others to experience a role crisis, struggling to

switch roles from their primary work to secondary jobs. Different job positions requiring distinct professional skills, attitudes, and behaviours may challenge young moonlighters in integrating these aspects of their professional selves, resulting in identity fragmentation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Some young moonlighters expect to develop a new career by having multiple jobs as a stepping stone (Panos et al., 2014). This aligns with the stochastic dynamic model established by Paxon and Sicherman (1996), which demonstrates that people who decide to take a secondary job often change their primary job later. These individuals aim to work more to search for a portfolio of jobs that provide desirable characteristics, facilitating the process of transitioning to a different occupation. Young adults today take a different view of their careers than in the past; they explore different career paths to find a better fit for their skills, interests, and values rather than seeking a stable job for basic living (Koen et al., 2012). Thus, moonlighting can be a beneficial way for young adults to gain diverse experiences and discover vocational passions that align with their long-term goals and aspirations, especially if they feel dissatisfied or unfulfilled in their current jobs. However, another challenge for young moonlighters is perceiving their professional identities within their vocations. Because young adults are in the process of constructing their identities and seeking social roles, having multiple jobs may hinder them from forming a clear narrative of their professional identities, potentially impacting the purpose and direction of their career goals (Pratt et al., 2006). Compared to young adults with a single job, those with multiple jobs may find it more challenging to adopt and perceive their identities, engage in their careers, and develop their career values (Boyle, 2019).

Emotional Distress and Burnout in Young Moonlighters

The relentless pursuit of financial stability and professional growth often takes a toll on mental well-being. Research indicates that work-life imbalance and excessive work hours strongly predict emotional distress and burnout (Skinner & Pocock, 2008). In particular, job burnout is not confined to thoughts about specific jobs or professions; rather, it is closely tied to the inability to balance, incorporate, or reconcile work, life, and family. This imbalance inevitably leads to distress, burnout and, in severe cases, the intention to leave one's profession (Hämmig, 2018).

Young adults with multiple jobs often lack the skills and strategies to achieve a balanced life, especially considering their recent entry into the workforce from academia. For instance, Sturges and Guest (2004) argued that young adults may have only been accustomed to study and class hours during school, with little experience in handling 8-hour shifts as part of a business schedule. Despite their pursuit of career success and a balanced life, tolerating excessive work hours for multiple jobs can undermine the possibility of achieving work-life balance, ultimately leading to increased exhaustion.

Young adults aged 25–34 are also susceptible to the pressures of building a career and potential financial stress. Those with multiple jobs might face various debts, including car financing, housing, student loans, and childcare expenses. According to the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program Annual Report (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023), from 2021–2022, Canadian students carried an average student debt of around $28,000 and took an average of 10 years to pay off these loans. Individuals aged 25–34 generally have a lower predicted income than other age groups because their salaries may reflect entry-level positions obtained after completing high school or postsecondary education. The average annual income for Canadians aged 25–34 in 2021 was $53,500, moderately lower than those aged 35–44, whose average income was $68,000 (Statistics Canada, 2023). Financial hardships contribute to elevated stress levels among young adults, exacerbating the challenges they face.

Career Counselling Implications for Young Moonlighters

In this section, happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009) and narrative career counselling theory (Cochran, 1997) will be used to suggest potential approaches career counsellors might take when career counselling young moonlighters. Using happenstance learning theory, ways career counsellors might help young moonlighters adapt positively to unplanned events, such as embracing opportunities to make diverse connections and cultivate mentorships, will be outlined. Using narrative career counselling theory, ways by

which career counsellors might harness the power of storytelling to help young moonlighters construct a coherent professional identity despite conflicting job roles will be discussed.

Using Happenstance Learning Theory

Happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009) illustrates the roles of social learning and unexpected events in shaping individuals' career choices and development. This theory offers several components beneficial to young moonlighters in career interventions. According to this theory, career counsellors teach clients to act for a more satisfying career and personal life, engaging in exploration to generate benefits from unplanned events (Krumboltz, 1998). Young moonlighters often encounter unplanned events (e.g., family emergencies, sickness, incidents) while working, challenging their ability to balance work and life. This approach helps clients understand past responses to unexpected events and respond positively to future chance events. It also encourages learning new skills, interests, beliefs, and work habits. The approach considers clients' environmental, cultural, and educational backgrounds, using lived experience for career decision-making (Linder-Pelz & Hall, 2005).

Happenstance learning theory essentially encourages young moonlighters to be open-minded and adaptable in the face of unexpected opportunities arising from dual employment. By valuing potential learning and growth from unplanned events, moonlighters may discover new avenues for skill development and career advancement. The happenstance model encompasses 5 skills—curiosity: exploring new learning opportunities; persistence: exerting effort despite setbacks; flexibility: changing attitudes and circumstances; optimism: viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable; and risk-taking: acting in the face of uncertain outcomes (Krumboltz, 1998). The career counsellor thus plays a role in encouraging clients to take a different perspective toward chance events so that they can perceive and respond to unexpected chances to improve in their career development, rather than seeing unexpected events as a challenge. Career counsellors must also encourage clients to take an active role in cultivating open-mindedness and an exploratory attitude willing to take risks and embrace chances. This could result in enhancing the life career pathway and vocational well-being (Chen, 2005). Rice (2013) emphasized that people who have adopted happenstance learning theory are more likely to accept uncertainties, actively change plans, and work hard to overcome barriers and consistently pursue their interests and chosen careers. Hence, career counsellors can help moonlighters develop these 5 skills to facilitate the development of abilities, enhancing their adaptability in the face of unforeseen challenges in either job.

Young adults often feel uncomfortable and overwhelmed by unplanned events. Planned happenstance theory–informed mentorship could help them optimize their attitudes to chance opportunities by cultivating the 5 skills (Vo et al., 2021). In North America, mentorship programs are among the most popular and beneficial strategies for skill development, experience sharing, stress relief, and networking among various age groups (Miller, 2002). During the mentorship program, young moonlighters can be acknowledged and reframe the uncertainty associated with happenstance and unplanned events in their dual jobs as an opportunity for growth-based positive mentorship experiences. This can be an effective career-assistance strategy for young moonlighters, aiding in achieving work-life balance (Lee et al., 2009). For instance, a young moonlighter struggling with an imbalanced life, unable to spend the New Year holiday with family due to work demands, could connect with peers facing similar challenges. Mentorship could effectively address challenges by teaching them to understand that growth often arises under circuitous and unpredictable circumstances, encouraging them to embrace these chances for skill exploration and furthering their career development. Mentorship could also help them reduce emotional distress and maintain high levels of job satisfaction. Moreover, mentorships facilitate social connections for young individuals lacking a social life due to excessive workloads. Mentors regularly engage within a specified period (e.g., once a week), fostering lasting social networks among peers (Bell & Rosowsky, 2021). Building diverse connections, moonlighters may encounter unforeseen opportunities, such as mentorships or collaborations, positively impacting their career development.

Using Cochran's Narrative Career Counselling Theory

Cochran's narrative career counselling encourages individuals to focus on the meaning of experiences, the reflexive process involved, and the contextual aspects of career paths. It allows clients to link their inner and social evolving experiences into a coherent whole (Cochran, 1997; Savickas et al., 2009). The 7 episodes of narrative career counselling are defining a career problem, composing a life history, eliciting a future narrative, reality construction, changing a life structure, enacting a role, and crystallizing a decision (Cochran, 1997). It emphasizes subjectivity and meaning, aiming to facilitate self-reflection and explain self-concepts for enhanced self-understanding. According to this theory, counsellors listen to clients' stories, capturing the inner means through which they reveal their experiences, and together with clients guide them to uncover their dreams, values, goals, and skills for future career development. Clients can piece together their stories as storytellers, informing their career-related decisions, goals, and directions (McMahon & Watson, 2013). In particular, the first 3 episodes can be beneficial to help young moonlighters relieve emotional distress and identity crises, enhancing vocational well-being.

During the first episode, counsellors can help clients identify or clarify a career problem, which might be the young moonlighter juggling life and feeling inner or external challenges. Counsellors encourage clients to facilitate the career problem naturally by themselves, but they can also guide them if needed. Once the client identifies the career problem, counsellors are responsible for helping them reconstruct their life histories and personal information to uncover resources for overcoming challenges. During this second episode, young moonlighters use storytelling to examine how their multiple roles contribute to their sense of self and professional identity by exploring their past experiences, cultural backgrounds, life habits, personality, and personal development (Bujold, 2004). Once concerns have been explored, the career counsellor plays a role as a co-creator to help clients enrich the details of a meaning-making process through their narratives. Consequently, the career counsellor can also assist the client to identify and organize the themes of the stories before moving to the third episode. These themes gather life events into the unity of a story, gaining significance and predicting the future along with themes (Charokopaki, 2019; McIlveen & Patton, 2007). During the third episode, the career counsellor continuously works with the client to construct a desired future narrative that represents a combination of their motivations, strengths, interests, and values, as outlined in the early episodes. This way, young moonlighters could be inspired by self-reflection to understand their career identities based on expressing their life themes with a specific occupation or career experience (McMahon & Watson, 2012).

Additionally, the idea of life themes in the third episode can be very effective in rebuilding the boundary of existing self-concepts. This is because life themes provide the client with a sense of unity in their life history from consciously or unconsciously perceived fundamental childhood courses, thereby triggering adaptive efforts to tackling problematic situations. Young moonlighters usually face emotional challenges and lack the confidence to overcome them because of past learning experiences. In this case, the career counsellor can assist them in exploring and reconstructing their career identities by coping with boundary experiences from childhood. Thus, the intervention can prevent young moonlighters from having a cognitive problem when they are facing an identity crisis, are in a very challenging situation, or have lost the ability to cope (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). For example, a young moonlighter facing an identity crisis and confusion about career goals and interests in 2 jobs could benefit from the counsellor guiding them to tell their stories, such as family background, significant relationships, culture, events, and memories. By helping the client put these elements together, the counsellor assists in creating a configuration, such as the meaning of life, which might address their concerns. This self-reflective process allows the client to gain insights into their values and motivation and the impact of role conflicts on their overall well-being (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). In general, this intervention follows a "past–present–future" approach: it illustrates the road to understanding a career despite potential changes over time, such as the achievements, career interests, and skills the client is likely to pursue. This approach serves as an effective tool to construct and conceptualize clients' vocational pathways, particularly for young moonlighters. Once they have a clear goal and no confusion of professional identities between multiple jobs, they feel empowered and in control, resulting in a high level of vocational well-being.

Conclusion

Given the substantial increase in the proportion of young people aged 25–34 years engaging in multiple jobholding, or moonlighting, this article has delved into the ongoing career issues and challenges they face in North America. These include an imbalanced life, role and identity crises, and emotional distress. Some key principles derived from Krumboltz's happenstance learning theory and Cochran's narrative career counselling theory are offered to address these specific issues. Importantly, this article provides preliminary ideas to enhance the vocational well-being of younger moonlighters through the application of career-assistance strategies. Future research should focus on exploring various career-counselling strategies and techniques to enhance the vocational well-being of this population. This will contribute to fostering a more equitable and supportive work environment in North America.

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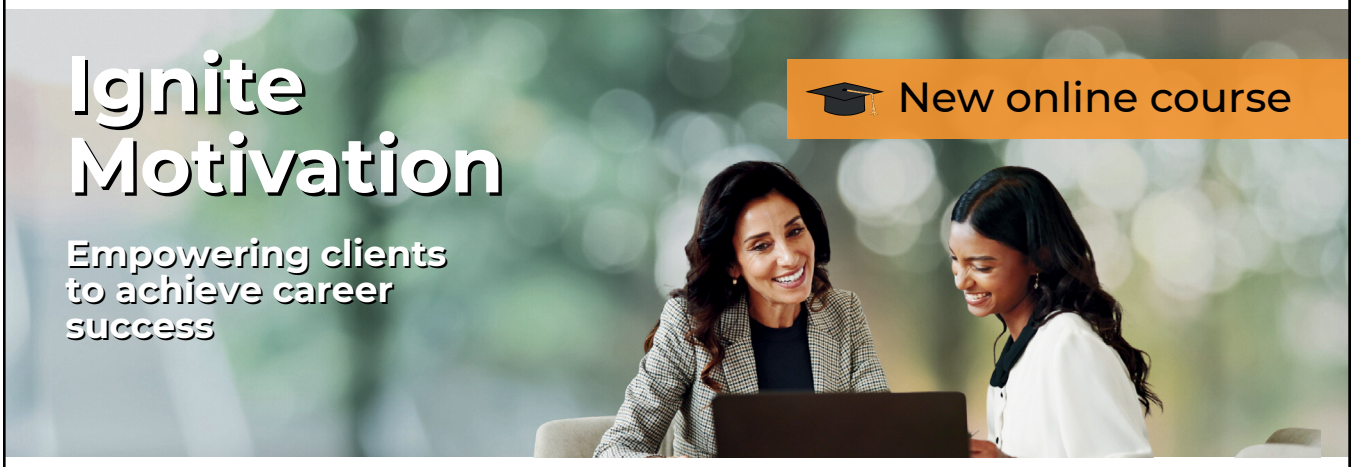

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Rural Realities: Bridging the Diversity Disconnect & Supporting Inclusion in Challenging Contexts

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Madeleine Warkentin, & Emily White. *Free Rein Associates*

Abstract

Workplaces everywhere, but especially in rural and remote communities, are not always welcoming to all who live within those communities. Many individuals are systemically marginalized, resulting in groups of people who are underrepresented in local employment. This article reports the findings of mixed-methods research conducted in BC, identifying 20 factors impacting the employment of underrepresented community members, with a particular focus on Indigenous Peoples and individuals living with disabling conditions. Based on insights and experiences from job seekers, employees, employers, and community service providers, recommendations are offered to support CDPs, employers, and policy makers to facilitate more equitable access to work for all.

Keywords: underrepresented, employment, inclusion, diversity, rural communities, Indigenous Peoples, Individuals with disabling conditions

Career development professionals (CDPs) working within rural and remote communities have identified challenges with helping their clients to find and maintain employment, even when local employers report that they are unable to find the employees that they need. To examine this disconnect, in partnership with a rural community service provider in southwestern British Columbia, Canada and, with the support of funding from the Government of Canada, we took a mixed-method approach, gathering qualitative and quantitative data from job seekers and employees who were from groups underrepresented in local workplaces, employers, and community service providers.

Literature Review

As a foundation to our research, we present some background information on rural and remote communities, the diversity of individuals living and working within those communities, who is underrepresented in local workplaces (i.e., unemployed or underemployed, but willing and able to work), and the challenges associated with providing employment services in those contexts.

Rural Communities

Although most Canadians live in urban centres close to the US border, 6.6 million live in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2022). What constitutes "rural" seems to be inconsistent across the literature with many considering degrees of remoteness. The *Strengthening Rural Canada* initiative defined rural as communities with populations between 1,000 and 12,000 (Strengthening Rural Canada, n.d.). To put that into perspective, in 2025 the three most populous cities in Canada are expected to hit 2.6 million (Toronto), 1.6 million (Montreal), and 1.0 million (Calgary; World Population Review, 2025).

Housing affordability is among one of common benefits of rural living (Statistics Canada, 2025d); however, it's not without its drawbacks. Rural Canadians have expressed a desire for investments into internet connectivity, vibrant communities, and infrastructure (Government of Canada, 2024b). In BC, the population of rural and small towns grew 2.8% between 2021 and 2024 (Statistics Canada, 2025e), and with programs such as the *Rural Community Immigration Pilot* drawing skilled immigrants into rural communities (Government of Canada, 2025c), the population growth may look different than before with more diverse individuals.

Diverse Individuals

In today's socioeconomic and geopolitical landscape, the word "diversity" can evoke a wide range of reactions – some brimming with positivity, possibilities, and potential; others with violence, vitriol, and venom. Although the backlash on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been felt, Canada's commitment persists within the public service (Government of Canada, 2025a) and through a long list of legislations (e.g., Accessible Canada Act, 2019), associations (e.g., CASE, n.d.), and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., United Nations, 2006, 2007) continuing to press for diversity as a positive force within work, life, and learning domains. In some instances, the DEI perspective has been expanded to include both justice (Kohl, 2022) and accessibility (Mullin et al., 2021). Information on the employment and economic participation of diverse groups is also more visible than ever. One example is the *Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics Hub* (Statistics Canada, 2025c) which provides targeted information for 2SLGBTQ+, immigrants, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized groups, and women.

From a researcher's perspective, narrow conceptions of diversity are helpful when crafting operational definitions and setting experimental conditions; however, this does not reflect the reality of complex people, experiences, and environments. Diversity is not only a multi-faceted construct extending across a variety of systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2003 as cited in Naidtich 2024), but also intersectional in nature (Puszka et al., 2022; Rummens, 2003) creating dynamic, unique lived realities. In our study, although we recognize complexity of culture and context, we have focused on two groups – Indigenous Peoples and individuals with disabling conditions. We recognize these categories are neither monoliths, nor static or singular.

According to the 2021 census in Canada, Indigenous People are the fastest growing population and the youngest population (Statistics Canada, 2023a). With nearly two-thirds currently of working age, the total Indigenous population comprises 5% of the Canadian population – i.e., 1.8 million (Statistics Canada, 2023a). The term "Indigenous," however, refers to people from three distinct groups – First Nations, Inuit, and Métis – and many unique communities within these groups, each with unique histories, cultural practices/protocols, spiritual beliefs, languages, and experiences with colonial violence and reconciliation efforts.

Canada also recognizes the complex nature of ability across physical, intellectual, and social domains (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013). In 2022, 8 million Canadians reported having at least one disability; that represents 27% of the working age population (Statistics Canada, 2023c). There has been some discourse on the appropriateness of "identity-first" versus "person-first" terminology with the former being more often utilized by those with stronger disability identity than the latter which was preferred by those with lower disability identity (Janiszewski et al., 2025). Indigenous groups in Canada, within their 70 or so languages (Statistics Canada, 2023b), do not generally have deficit-based words like "disability" (Rojas-Cárdenas et al., 2025). For the purposes of our study, and in collaboration with the project's advisory committee, the terms "individuals with diverse abilities" or "disabling conditions" were used.

Underrepresented, Unemployed, and Underemployed

Although there is no clear definition of who is "underrepresented," the consensus in Canada includes a wide variety of diverse identities including youth, mature workers, gender minorities, newcomers, social assistance recipients, religious minorities, those with limited work experience, those with a criminal record, those who are homeless, survivors of domestic abuse, and those who have experienced periods of involuntary long-term unemployment (Government of Canada, 2022). To further complicate this definition, many individuals identify with more than one of these groups and can experience multiple barriers related to the intersectionality of these identities. Underrepresented groups are often assumed to be less skilled, making full inclusion difficult and, over time, the cumulative effects of barriers, discrimination, and prejudice create a lasting generational impact (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2021).

Although the bringing together of diverse perspectives can foster innovation, creativity, and better decision-making (El Ghazali, n.d.), the perceptions of DEI in the workplace have shifted in recent years

(National Public Radio, 2024). Many now see DEI policies and initiatives as giving an unfair advantage to specific groups, rather than levelling the playing field.

Multiculturalism in the workplace remains important for many Canadians. A recent Statistics Canada report highlighted diversity amongst business owners – 20.1% owned by immigrants, 14.4% owned by a visible minority, and 4.5% owned by First Nations, Métis, or Inuit People (Statistics Canada, 2025a). Of those who work, 85% of Canadians reported that they felt their cultural differences were respected, with only 12% indicating they experienced unfair treatment, racism, or discrimination. Nonetheless, both individuals with disabling conditions and those with Indigenous backgrounds have been and continue to be, excluded from many Canadian workplaces.

In 2023, Statistics Canada reported that persons with disabilities were less likely to work full-time than those without a disability (i.e., 77% versus 85%) and for those who did, they earned 16.6% less annually than people without a disability (Statistics Canada, 2023d). The severity and duration of the disabling condition was associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing work-related barriers such as those related to the physical environment, communication, transportation, and technology (Statistics Canada, 2025b).

The employment rate for all classifications of Indigenous individuals was below that of non-Indigenous individuals (74.1%) ranging from 47.1% for Registered Indians on Reserve to 69.1% for Métis (Government of Canada, 2023). A similar pattern occurred when looking at median employment income with all classifications falling below that of non-Indigenous individuals ($47,600) ranging from $29,400 for Registered Indians on Reserve to $45,600 for Métis (Government of Canada, 2023). Top employment barriers noted by Indigenous Canada included culture, driver's license, and literacy/education (Indigenous Canada, n.d.).

Service Delivery

CDPs are at the front lines of a shifting world of work, playing an active role in supporting individuals, workplaces, and communities. As in other industries, professionals in the career development sector are dealing with an increasingly chaotic employment landscape (e.g., reconciling the impacts of colonialism, dealing with economic precarity, responding to the decline in mental health and well-being; So, 2023). In Canada, supporting diverse clients has been embedded in our profession as part of the *Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals* (Canadian Career Development Foundations [CCDF], 2021b) and *Career Development Professional Code of Ethics* (CCDF, 2021a). As a result, this formalizes concepts like diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in our practice and in our *National Career Certification* (Nova Scotia Career Development Association, 2025).

Much of the work for CDPs centres around fostering the essential skills individuals need to find and maintain work. The Employment and Social Development Canada's *Skills for Success* framework comprises nine skills foundational for success at work, life, and learning: adaptability, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation, digital, numeracy, problem solving, reading, and writing (Government of Canada, 2025d). Between 2023 and 2024, there were 87 projects funded to further research the Skills for Success (Government of Canada, 2024a), including those targeted to Indigenous Peoples and individuals with disabling conditions.

A recent study on career services for clients in rural and remote communities highlighted challenges with travelling distances to access services; recruiting staff, clients, and partners; ensuring digital access; and managing service contract challenges in equitable ways suitable to rural realities (Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training [ASPECT], 2022). With limited access to additional resources/supports and limited opportunities in the local labour market (e.g., resource- or tourism-based, small- and medium-enterprises), CDPs struggle to meet client needs.

Although service providers have traditionally focused on providing services to individuals struggling with job acquisition and maintenance, the emerging dual-client model carves out space to also support *employers* who are struggling to find and keep good workers. MixtMode and CCDF (2024) outlined helpful insights from the Thriving Workplaces project for designing and delivering community-based programming which attended to both sides of the employment relationship – individuals and employers. Employers, particularly small businesses, lack the resources/capacity to find and keep employees, and are unable to invest

in strategic workforce planning to address the shifting labour market (MixtMode & CCDF, 2024, 2025). The *Thriving Workplaces* project focussed interventions on common "magnetic" factors that both employers and employees deemed important (i.e., meaning and values, workplace culture, inclusion and belonging, working arrangements, skills and competencies, growth, pay and benefits, and external conditions).

The Disconnect

Individuals with diverse needs who live in rural and remote communities are struggling to find and maintain work. Service providers are struggling to effectively support them. Employers report challenges in finding the employees they need to run their organizations and businesses effectively. Funded by the Government of Canada (Government of Canada, 2025b), the *Diversity Disconnect: Job Acquisition and Maintenance Factors for Indigenous Peoples and Individuals with Diverse Abilities* project sought to examine and bridge the disconnect between underrepresented job seekers and employees, workplaces, and employers within rural and remote communities of British Columbia (Free Rein Associates, n.d.).

Our research goals were to:

- Discover how the Skills for Success model can be utilized to bridge the disconnect between employers and underrepresented employees
- Identify ways the Skills for Success model can prepare both employers and underrepresented employees to maintain employment and be productive participants in the labour force
- Identify better ways for employers to support underrepresented employees, such as Indigenous Peoples and persons with diverse abilities, to maintain employment

Method

Five specific communities in southwestern British Columbia were identified as the focus for the study: Agassiz, Ashcroft, Hope, Merritt, and Princeton. Hope, BC is where Free Rein Associates, the primary project partner, is located; the remaining four communities were in reasonable proximity to Hope, yet with unique contexts in terms of industries, access to resources, demographics, cultures, and histories. To maximize relevance of the study for these and other similar communities, the project began by forming an advisory committee to guide the research design, introduce the research team to people within the communities, and help to interpret the research results and implement the final recommendations. We selected and trained local research assistants who themselves were members of underrepresented populations (e.g., person with disabling condition, Indigenous, Immigrant, 2SLGBTQIA, women, youth), and employed a holistic mixed-method approach that provided space for multiple perspectives to be included. Although this research was conducted outside of an academic setting, all researchers followed the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2), with special consideration to Fairness and Equity in Research Participation (Chapter 4; 2022a); Research involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada (Chapter 9; 2022b); and Qualitative Research (Chapter 10; 2022c).

Advisory Committee

An advisory committee was formed to ensure a trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach. The committee comprised members of the local First Nations, disability service providers, and other relevant community groups. Committee members received a small honorarium for their time providing feedback, guidance, and support throughout the project.

During the preliminary meeting, the committee provided insights into our environmental scan focused on addressing the complexity of our research participants and ethical considerations to guide the research process. Although the committee saw the relevance of frameworks like the Skills for Success, they emphasized

the need to recognize the impact of pre-employability factors. They cautioned against focusing solely on skill-based training. Instead, they reminded us to look for flexible, creative, and "outside of the box" thinking which aimed to address rigid "corporate" policies and to recognize the practical and logistical challenges and barriers that impeded individuals' ability to demonstrate and/or build skills. In addition, they reinforced the need for person-first language which mirrored preferred language use within the groups we were connecting (e.g., changing from non-traditional vs. underrepresented, persons with disabilities to individuals with disabling conditions, and stigmatized populations to marginalized populations).

During subsequent meetings we elicited feedback on the methodological approach and collection materials (i.e., survey, interview protocol), and reviewed ways the committee could support the data collection phase.

Building a Research Team

The team also hired two project assistants, each with a passion for supporting underrepresented communities and rich lived experience as members of underrepresented groups themselves. Their positionality was an asset to this research, facilitating relationship building with community members and offering culturally unique lenses that informed the research process and data analysis. During the onboarding process, specific training was provided on managing research projects, engaging in ethical research practices (i.e., the TCPS 2), and using culturally appropriate methodologies (e.g., the Enhanced Critical Incident Approach, Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009). Throughout the project, the research coordinator, primary investigator, and project manager provided the assistants with ongoing coaching and mentorship.

Research Approach

As researchers, we were curious about factors contributing to the disconnect that we had noticed between rural employers' needs for staff and the community members who were actively seeking work but not being hired – or, if hired, not keeping their jobs. We wanted to include diverse perspectives (i.e., jobseekers, workers, employers, and community service providers). We also wanted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, resulting in compelling numerical evidence, where possible, that would be complemented by rich stories in the participants' own words. We, therefore, chose to take a multi-method approach which included a survey and focus groups / interviews.

Survey

The **survey** gathered qualitative and quantitative information from three key groups: (1) job seekers, (2) employees, and (3) employers. A sorting question was used to direct participants to the appropriate series of questions which were phrased slightly differently but elicited equivalent information to make comparisons across groups. The first part included general questions around diversity within the workplace, how supported employees feel to be successful at work, and whether accessibility/cultural needs are addressed. Next, participants rated the importance of the nine Skills for Success in finding and maintaining employment. Lastly, participants ranked a variety of tasks related to their employment journey in terms of how challenging or easy they were.

Surveys were completed online, in-person, or through a condensed mail-in postcard. Due to a low response rate initially, we added the postcard option part-way through the data collection process to encourage additional participation.

Focus Group and Interview Protocol

The structure for conversations with participants followed the ECIT (Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009). Participants were prompted to reflect on critical incidents related to the employment success of underrepresented groups and then asked to identify what had helped to facilitate success, what had hindered

success, and what they wished might have been available to them. All contributions were transcribed and analysed in line with Butterfield et al. (2005, 2009) guidance for the ECIT approach. The process included:

1. Clarify specific terminology/language during the focus group and/or interview with respondent to verify understanding.
2. Review transcript and notes by the interviewer and at least one additional researcher; provide an opportunity for the respondent to review, adjust, and approve.
3. Send finalized transcripts/notes to the full research team for independent categorization.
4. Obtain consensus of independent categorization across the full research for categories reaching a 25% representation threshold in the dataset.
5. Consult with an independent ECIT expert and employment counsellor to ensure accuracy of our methodology/results and obtain advice on next steps.
6. Develop full category descriptions; send to participants for review and approval.
7. Cross-checking of category representation for adequate representation (i.e., 25%) and categories were presented in descending order of frequency.
8. Extracting relevant quotes illustrating categories.

The research team had planned several in-person focus groups as the primary data collection methodology; however, this proved to be particularly challenging in rural/remote communities due to scheduling and such logistical considerations as road closures due to wildfires and small business owners not being able to get coverage to free themselves up to leave their workplaces. To maximize participation, we added the option of one-on-one interviews which were conducted either online or in-person, onsite in the community. Both the focus groups and interviews used the same interview protocol. As with the survey, specific prompts were customized depending on participant type – in this case (1) individual employees and/or job seekers, (2) workplaces, and (3) community representatives.

Participants

Participant recruitment efforts reflected both convenience and snowball sampling methods including cold contacts (e.g., emailing/phoning local businesses, placing advertisements online in local newspapers and on bulletin boards, attending community events, and visiting First Nations community band offices) and warm contacts (e.g., obtaining referrals/introductions from key contacts and advisory committee members, inviting focus group/interview participants to also complete the survey). The team brought small gifts during initial site visits (e.g., custom-made cookies) to support building connections and recognizability of the project. In total, the research team reached out to over 75 service providers, 100 employers, and 450 individual employees or job seekers across the targeted communities, often providing food and refreshments.

To further encourage participation, an incentive was provided within both data collection methods. For the survey, participants were entered into a draw for a Samsung Galaxy Tablet through a prize draw survey that kept identifying information separate from the survey results. Each participant who attended a focus group or one-on-one interview received a $25 gift card, either for a local business or a generic VISA gift card.

Results

Full results and a detailed demographic profile of respondents are available on the project website (Free Rein Associates, n.d.). Responses were included in the data analysis if participants had responded to at least one question; those who only responded to the sorting question were removed. In total, 82 surveys represented the perspectives of job seekers (n=31), employees (n=35), and employers (n=16). Forty-eight participants completed individual interviews (16 individuals, 11 employers, 7 community representatives) or attended a focus group (n= 14, across 3 groups – all individuals).

Survey Findings

For the survey, data from the full version and postcards were amalgamated together. Descriptive data comprised percentages and average score calculations. Missing data were excluded from the analysis.

There was a disconnect in the perceptions of diversity (see Table 1). Only 49% of job seekers strongly agreed or agreed that the workforce/staff of employers within their rural area represented the diversity of the community. However, when employers were asked if their business/organization reflected the diversity in their communities, they had a more favorable assessment (72% agreed or strongly agreed). Responses from current employees were in between the other two groups (63% agreed or strongly agreed).

Table 1

Perceptions of Diversity

Respondent Type	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Job Seeker (n=41)	When I look at employers in my area, the workforce/staff represent the diversity of my community.	7%	20%	24%	44%	5%
Employees (n=49)	When I look around my workplace, it represents the diversity within my community.	8%	15%	14%	51%	12%
Employer (n=25)	When I look around my community, my business/ organization adequately represents its diversity.	0%	16%	12%	56%	16%

When asked about the level of support they received (see Table 2), current employees reported feeling fairly supported within their current workplace (68% either agreed or strongly agreed) and employers reported it was not a struggle to balance the equity, diversity, and inclusion of underrepresented groups with their day-to-day business realities (48% either agreed or strongly agreed). Job seekers, on the other hand, had a less favourable assessment, with only 31% agreeing that employers in their area supported individuals with accessibility or cultural needs.

Respondents reviewed a variety of job acquisition and maintenance tasks. Job seekers and employees were in alignment that *finding job opportunities within [their]community was* difficult. Job seekers rated it the most difficult (n=26) and employers rated it the second most difficult (n=23). Similarly, employers indicated *finding potential applicants within [their] community* was most difficult (n=18). Employers also noted a struggle in *securing necessary supports/accommodations to be successful* (n=11) and *offering advancement opportunities* (n=8).

One notable disconnect was that, although job seekers indicated that feeling welcomed/valued within the existing workplace environment (n=13) was amongst the most difficult, employers rated providing a welcoming space within the existing workplace environment (n=10) as the easiest.

Lastly, on a scale of 1-3 (i.e., 1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important), respondents considered how important each of the Skills for Success were to success in finding and maintaining employment. The mean values are presented in Table 3.

It is worth noting that all the Skills for Success scored above 2.00 on the scale of 1-3, indicating that respondents identified each of the skills as at least somewhat important for both finding and maintaining employment. Across all respondent types, *Communication* was ranked as the most important skill for both

Table 2

Level of Support

Respondent Type	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Job Seeker (n=36)	Employers in my area fully support the employment of individuals with specific accessibility or cultural needs	2%	25%	39%	31%	0%
Employees (n=49)	My current employer fully supports the employment of individuals with specific accessibility or cultural needs	6%	8%	18%	37%	31%
Employer (n=25)	I struggle to balance the equity, diversity, and inclusion of underrepresented groups with the realities of day-to-day business*	0%	40%	12%	36%	12%

Note: * reverse-scored item

Table 3

Skills for Finding & Maintaining Employment

Finding Employment	Mean	Maintaining Employment	Mean
Communication	2.93	Communication	2.87
Reading	2.73	Adaptability	2.76
Collaboration	2.71	Collaboration	2.75
Adaptability	2.71	Problem Solving	2.74
Problem Solving	2.70	Reading	2.68
Writing	2.58	Writing	2.62
Digital	2.33	Digital	2.35
Creativity and Innovation	2.31	Creativity and Innovation	2.33
Numeracy	2.25	Numeracy	2.32

finding (job seekers M=2.84; employees M=2.96; employers M=3.00) and maintaining employment (job seekers M=2.85; employees M=2.88; employers M=2.88).

With the assumptions of independence, normality, and homogeneity of variance confirmed, ANOVAs were run across the three groups for each skill. Only *Creativity & Innovation*, revealed a statistical difference between groups for finding employment – i.e., $F(2, 113) = 5.49, < .005$ - indicating that job seekers (M=2.56) were more likely than employees (M=2.23) and employers (M=2.12) to rate Creativity & Innovation higher.

Interviews / Focus Groups

The ECIT analysis revealed 20 categories which comprise factors that helped to facilitate or constrain the employment success of individuals from underrepresented groups. Each of these categories came up in various ways as the interview and focus group data were analysed (the following numbers indicate how many times an item that fit within the category was identified). The categories include: Opportunities (71), Rural Realities (62), Training and Learning (62), Work Environments (62), Fit (60), Awareness (57), Accessibility/ Accommodation (56), Communication (55), Bureaucracy (52), Respect (50), Connections (48), Financial (48), Flexibility (46), Community (44), Motivation (42), Interpersonal Skills (40), Discrimination (36), Collaboration (34), Transportation (28), and Authenticity (28).

Each of these categories comprised both helping and hindering factors. For example, in the absence of *Opportunities* for an individual to gain work experience, that individual's ability to find or keep a job was negatively impacted. On the other hand, individuals benefitted greatly from an employer taking a chance on them despite their limited prior experience; initial employment success led to subsequent successes. One individual shared, "But they [employers] also have to stop and realize there are people out here that can do a job and do it well. If you just give them the opportunity" (I7980). In some cases, underrepresented employees became employers themselves. One employer we spoke to who personally identified as being an individual with a disabling condition, chose to only hire individuals who also have disabling conditions, passing forward the opportunities that had contributed to their own success.

The consensus in the *Rural Realities* category was that approaches imported from urban settings without customization hinder employment success. Both pros and cons were identified in relation to being known by everyone within a small community. For example, one employer shared: "It's a small town. I know everyone so it's, yeah, easy to hire" (W7745). However, others saw challenges associated with limited opportunities and many felt the need to leave their communities to get a good job; others felt they have to just put up with the status quo.

> In a small community, people are afraid to say anything because the supervisor is really well known and has grown up here and you know, and [employees] are afraid of losing their jobs. And so instead of speaking up and trying to correct the problems, people are quitting or they're just putting up with it and are very miserable and unhappy at work. (I7980)

Regarding *Training/Learning*, participants discussed both formal and informal options, including onboarding and ongoing on-the-job training. One participant shared:

> You have good employers who are willing to invest in their people, build the skills internally, and that's great. And that really thrives. But when you don't have that and your employer is expecting you to keep up on skills on your own time and on your own dime, it's really discouraging. (I1278)

Not surprisingly, the lack of formal training available in their rural communities negatively impacted their job opportunities. It is not uncommon that when individuals leave their communities for training, they stay away for work, so the community does not benefit from the skills they have gained. To address this, some communities have arranged to bring in trainers, both for specific in-demand technical skills and also for some of the foundational skills (like driver's training) that impact one's ability to get or keep work. Training within the community is also easier to customize, ensuring that it is culturally appropriate and relevant.

In discussing *Work Environments*, participants compared healthy work environments (e.g., safe, professional, caring, with clear expectations and boundaries) to toxic work environments where they experienced bullying, discrimination, harassment, or unsafe conditions. One individual shared, "It's so much nicer when you can feel like you're part of the company, right? Not just there to do the work" (I3490). A few mentioned that larger employers within rural areas may cite safety considerations as a reason to not hire people from underrepresented groups; although some of these concerns were legitimate, there appeared to be sweeping policies rather than an approach that would assess risk according to the individual's strengths

and needs for accommodation to perform a specific role. This was an example of the types of systemic discrimination that participants had encountered in trying to get and keep good jobs. A community service provider shared the following:

> Yeah, I mean we can provide all the services in the world, but if you don't, if you don't personally feel safe coming into our space like you feel like you might be looked down upon or denigrated or treated poorly because that's all you've experienced, I can't blame you. But hopefully that, by creating that safe space, it's showing you that it's safe. (C5066)

When people felt like they *Fit* within the work environment, they were more likely to enjoy work and stay longer in specific roles or organizations. However, when employees did not seem to fit (either through their own perception or as perceived by colleagues and supervisors), they were more likely to move on – either by choice or by being laid off or fired. One employer noted that, "the match between what Indigenous candidates need and desire is not often a great match between how a public recruitment system operates" (W0259), highlighting the true scope of "fit" across many domains.

Throughout this project, the research team witnessed in person, as well as heard from participants, the impact of lack of *Awareness*. Some employers told us that there were no people with disabilities living in the community, and yet we had just interviewed people with visible disabilities in that same community and interviewed community service providers who supported many people identifying with disabilities who lived there. We also know that disabling conditions may be transient or undiagnosed. One individual shared:

> I have migraines and there's been a few times when I had to call and say, "I'm sorry I can't come in I have a migraine and I'm in bed" and she would say, "Oh, just take a Tylenol and come to work" . . . I finally got diagnosed in 2020 with lupus and I got fired because [my employer] said I wasn't reliable. (I3496)

In addition, one organization reported a failed attempt to establish a committee focussed on diversity, equity, and inclusion because they couldn't find anybody who fit the criterion of belonging to one of the identified equity-seeking groups. On the other hand, when awareness was raised and underrepresented individuals were recognized and better understood, participants reported that this facilitated workplace disclosures so that the need for accommodation could be realistically assessed and addressed, resulting in hiring and supporting the right person for a job rather than hiring to meet a quota.

As mentioned, *Accessibility and Accommodations* are important to many who are struggling to find and keep good jobs. This category is closely related to the previous one though, as without awareness, discussions about what accommodations may be needed are simply unlikely to occur. One individual shared their frustration, "There's a disconnect between our schools, K to 12, where we're celebrated, we're supported. And then they go to the workplace, which is - we don't talk about it. 'What do you mean you have - you need to have an accommodation? I don't know what that means.'" (I0507). A concern often expressed by employers was that accommodations would be either too expensive or logistically impossible to manage. However, interviews with those who required accommodations tended to paint a different picture; often the needed accommodations were intangible – like understanding and flexibility – and others were low cost or could be covered by available funding.

Another category that comprised both helping and hindering factors was *Communication*. As noted previously, this was also the Skill for Success considered most important across all groups responding to the survey. When communication was noted as helpful, it involved active listening without bias or discrimination, valuing input from all, and inviting input and feedback. One individual shared, "You need to be able to hear what people are saying, because not everybody will hear, or say what they really want" (I0109). However, unclear communication (e.g., incomplete or unclear messages) was noted as negatively impacting employment success. A respondent shared, "No one also expects to get every single job they apply for. And without that feedback, how are they supposed to grow?" (W0259), in reference to employers leaving applicants out of the loop on hiring decisions.

Many respondents mentioned the impact of *Bureaucracy* (i.e., the administrative processes in

employment supports and programs and within employers' organizations). In some cases, access to information, programs, guidance, and funding were valuable assets; in others, however, rigid policies, complex application processes or reporting requirements provided barriers to individuals in need of support as well as to employers who may have otherwise been willing to hire and train them. One individual shared their frustration with online systems:

> I feel like I have to click 100 links just to find something and then when I do find something, I'm like okay the requirements are so strict that I would never - I would never qualify for anything like that. (I0172) Another shared, "There's this delicate balance between accountability of government and stewardship of the taxpayers' money and development of systems that are cumbersome . . . There's a line. There's a balance. And I'm not sure we've hit it." (C3212).

Respect also came up as a recurring theme in our research. Employment success was supported when respect was mutual (i.e., individuals respected employers and employers respected their workers). In respectful work environments, individuals reported being treated with dignity, given autonomy, and supported to grow and develop, and employers reported an appreciation for employees who followed the rules, were accountable for their own actions, and responded positively to opportunities that were presented. This was shared by respondents in statements like, "In a small community, that's what people look for, right? They're looking for jobs where they're going to have benefits, where they're going to be well taken care of, and treated respectfully." (I7980). However, in disrespectful environments, pity, abuse, and negative interactions with customers or colleagues kept employment success out of reach. In this category, a general lack of respect for Indigenous culture and knowledge was noted by many respondents as evident in the following contribution:

> Indigenous People are from my perspective and what the government showcases, I think the Indigenous folks are . . . treated negatively and . . . I can't even put the words into my mouth but, for years and years and years and years (I1629).

Another category comprising both helping and hindering factors was *Connections*. Many helpful connections were noted, especially for individuals with a positive reputation within the community and a well-established network. One respondent shared: "It's not what you know, it's who you know." (I0507). However, in rural and remote communities, the opposite can also be the case – it can be very difficult to repair ruptured relationships or damaged reputations, and even the reputations of relatives or friends can impact one's employment success. One respondent shared: "You know what else is hindering? It's . . . favouritism within the communities. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's experienced or even witnessed [it]." (I2651). In this category, as well as the previous one, there was specific mention of the importance of positive connections with the local Indigenous communities – connections which, in many cases, had not been established.

Money matters. The *Financial* category comprised such factors as pay and benefits, cost of living, and funding available for programs and services. Some individuals mentioned how working, especially when being paid a living wage, helped to stabilize their lives. However, others noted that living costs were often higher than they could afford with part-time or precarious jobs, keeping them in an unending cycle of poverty. One respondent shared, "With my paycheck, I can hardly pay the rent and food . . . It's not about being greedy. It's just about being able to survive, survive gracefully." (C9792). Employers also expressed concerns about the costs of accommodations and community service providers called for increased funding for training and to support accommodations for those who needed them.

Another category that emerged as both a helping and hindering factor was *Flexibility*. This included customized and adaptable supports and systems, supporting innovative, strength-based solutions. Rigid systems, on the other hand, negatively impacted employment success. Sometimes just offering a flexible work schedule opened the door to good work for someone who was unable to work long hours or could not predict when a short break might be needed for medical reasons. Other times, the flexibility was needed for Indigenous clients to participate in important community events and family responsibilities. A respondent noted:

> There's times where I'd have to book off at least 4 days or a week just to be where I have to be. There's a lot of death in our families because we consider - family it's just extended and huge. (I8022)

Many respondents also talked about the overall impact of their *Community* on their employment success – both positive and negative. One of the five communities that participated in our research stood out from the rest in terms of accessibility, a welcoming spirit of inclusion, and an intentional (and visible) integration of groups that were typically underrepresented elsewhere, sharing insights like, "It really is a - a town that likes to be very helpful. You know, we've gone through the flood, we've gone through different little disasters and - and people are there to help." (W9292). Participants also mentioned, however, the negative impact of loss of community – for example when they had to relocate from their home communities for access to training, work, or specialized services. One respondent shared: "There used to be a whole lot more of a sense of community that existed in smaller communities, and I don't feel we have that to the same extent anymore, which is unfortunate." (C6510).

Motivation also surfaced as a category mentioned by many. It was clear that the individuals with whom we spoke had a deep desire to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways and facilitate their own ongoing growth and development. They took pride in their work and wanted opportunities to demonstrate their work ethic. Some of the employers who participated in this study also identified as members of underrepresented groups (e.g., some mentioned their own disabilities; others were members of Indigenous communities). These employers drew from their own lived experiences, fueling their motivation to provide opportunities for others who struggled. On the other hand, both individuals and employers identified demotivating factors, such as high turnover after onboarding, economic disincentives to getting off social assistance or disability allowances. One employer shared:

> It just seems that people don't take their job seriously anymore [...] I mean, I grew up in a time where 40 hours was 40 hours, right? That was full time employment and they just – it doesn't seem like people are getting that. They want to work on their terms, not the employers' terms and it's almost a backwards way of thinking to me. (W9860)

There seemed to be some rigid expectations that impacted success (e.g., an unwillingness to consider anything except remote work; inflexibility in providing accommodations). It was interesting that some discussion occurred about too much motivation also being problematic, in that if individuals took on more than they could handle, burnout or another health setback could result.

Participants also identified *Interpersonal Skills* as impacting both finding and keeping employment. Specifically, they mentioned positive traits like accountability, ownership, confidence, and dependability as contributing to employment success. However, they also mentioned the detrimental effects of a poor attitude, including being apathetic; they also mentioned fearfulness as a hindering factor. One respondent shared, "They don't have the social skills, they don't have the, I don't know, the essential skills to be able to get up and go to work and maintain those jobs." (C6456). Of course, interpersonal skills involve interactions with others; respondents noted that power dynamics and, also, how people relate to each other can both help and hinder employment success.

It is perhaps not surprising that in research involving underrepresented populations, Discrimination surfaced as a theme. Participants provided examples of racism, stereotypes, and the ongoing impact of colonialism. One shared:

> Just because we have a disability, it doesn't mean that we have to be treated differently. We're still the same . . . I know some employers, if they find that you have a disability, they treat you differently than, say, like a worker that doesn't have a disability. (I3496).

In several cases, the discrimination perpetuated beliefs about the limited value that members of Indigenous communities or people living with disabilities had to offer to the workplace; in others, the discrimination was directed towards customers or clients who were members of the same groups that the

employee identified with, leaving the employee feeling disrespected or not trusted, even though the comment was directed at someone else. It was interesting that many employers and community service providers expressed confidence that there was no discrimination within their setting. For example, one shared, "When people are hired, they come to work in an inclusive environment - you know, free of bias and prejudice and that - you know it's a welcoming place where people want to come to work." (W2280). This, however, contrasted with the many examples shared by others within those same communities.

The impact of *Collaboration* was mentioned by many. This ranged in scope, from walking alongside individuals to support them to bringing together several organizations within a community in more formal partnership agreements. As a hindering factor, lack of collaboration resulted in isolation, and redundant services or gaps. One participant noted, "I've been able to have numerous interactions, develop partnerships you know with different communities. And yeah it's been beneficial. (W2280).

Transportation was an interesting category, in that it was the only one mentioned by individuals and community service providers but not by employers, revealing an apparent, but significant, disconnect. In rural and remote communities, access to safe, reliable, and affordable transportation is a lifeline, providing access to work, healthcare, education, financial independence, and community engagement. One respondent reported:

> We lack a transportation system. So, people without driver's licenses . . . this is poverty, this is disconnection from family . . . we see young people that are unable to, they want to get their driver's license, but they don't have anybody that will teach them. And we don't have a driving school here and to bring a driving school in here gets quite expensive. (C3212)

The final category that emerged was *Authenticity* – essentially, the opportunity to be genuine and to bring one's full identity to work, school, and community activities. One respondent said, "It's - it's really about holding that space, truth, and vulnerability, and all of those pieces to be your whole self." (I0507). In contexts where people do not feel safe to be authentic, individuals may not disclose important information about the accommodations necessary for disabling conditions or cultural responsibilities, and organizations may misrepresent opportunities or services in job ads or other communication. Being authentic occurs in a context where it is safe to show our humanity. In the words of one participant, "The difference, I think, between a good employer and a bad is one who sees the human in you" (I1278).

Authenticity was described as genuine, honest, and open communication, collaboration, and connections across respondent groups. Where present, authenticity enabled stakeholders to represent themselves and their intentions with clarity and truth. It was helpful to support individuals to feel safe to disclose conditions and request the accommodations they need, trusting they'd be heard. Lack of authenticity hindered employment success resulting in individuals hiding/masking conditions and in workplaces/communities misrepresenting hiring requirements and processes.

It is worth noting that each of the categories was represented across all respondent types with the exception of Transportation. Although individuals and community representatives acknowledged the impact of having (or lacking) accessible, safe, and reliable transportation, employers didn't identify transportation as either a helping or hindering factor.

Discussion

Analyzing the research results led to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the disconnect that had originally inspired this study. As the 20 categories of helping and hindering factors clearly indicate, there is no "one size fits all" solution. Applying a systems lens (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the data analysis helps to reveal how *interconnected* the issues are that have, ironically, led to the *disconnect* between diverse, underrepresented job seekers and the rural employers who desperately need good workers.

Although employers genuinely thought their workplaces represented the diversity of their communities, job seekers and employees were more critical. This, in part, may be related to "colour blindness" (i.e., the tendency born from embracing diversity to see all people as equal). However, this lack of awareness of

difference is dangerous in that it negates the very real barriers that underrepresented groups regularly face. Also, diversity (e.g., disabling conditions, Indigenous) is not always apparent, especially in rural communities where underrepresented groups may have limited access or not feel included (e.g., "out of sight, out of mind"). For these reasons, the fear of judgement and discrimination hold many underrepresented individuals back from living authentically and openly. As the research team began disseminating results, specifically on social media, we were met with some negative, and even hateful comments. These comments reflected the very bias/stereotypes that the research was aiming to overcome and reinforced the need to consider the report's recommendations within the shifting landscape of DEI practices.

Employers are focused on building their businesses; however, they struggle to find and keep employees. Many employers lack an awareness of, and/or desire or resources to, support employees with complex employment challenges. They generally believed that creating welcoming/safe spaces was an easy task, but job seekers struggled to find such spaces in their communities. Without open communication, one of the Skills for Success, individuals, workplaces, and communities will continue to struggle to find common ground. Communities looking for solutions are often left overwhelmed by bureaucracy and disappointed by the lack of flexibility to meet their community's specific needs.

Recommendations

Get Real

A holistic, system-based exploration of the experiences of different groups is necessary to foster a shared understanding of lived experiences in the context of rural realities. This requires an increased awareness of another's perspective and a willingness to challenge disconnects, biases, and assumptions. Unfortunately, many individuals, employers, and communities are in information echo chambers that reinforce polarization through social media algorithms (Chueca Del Cerro, 2024). Anti-DEI policies seem to have gained momentum in this polarized state, along with a focus on merit-based hiring. Such a backlash ignores systemic barriers, interpreting success or failure as inherently tied to only individual qualities (Mogilski et al., 2025). Further examination and open, unbiased debate seem to be needed now more than ever to help bridge the diversity disconnect.

Our respondents emphasized how the job opportunity itself was insufficient. If the work environment is unsafe, unaccommodating, or toxic due to a manager's disposition or the organization's inflexibility, no amount of training focussed on upskilling the individual will fix that issue. We heard employers offer sentiments that echo the popular phrase "no one wants to work anymore," indicating that it was a struggle to find qualified, motivated candidates within their rural communities. However, individual job seekers shared similar struggles finding suitable, decent employment opportunities; many were desperate to just get a chance to prove themselves. Community representatives were confident they had clients that could make meaningful, valuable contributions within local workplaces with just a few accommodations, but employers were reluctant to engage with the burden of reporting and oversight protocols in order to qualify for wage subsidies or on-the-job training supports. Employers thought it was easy to provide a welcoming space, but job seekers were more critical – they thought it was difficult to feel welcome/valued within the workplace.

Even if a position is a great fit, if the individual could not access reliable transportation, they simply would not be successful if they could not consistently get to work. We saw this clearly in our research related to transportation – employers didn't report transportation as a factor contributing to employment success; individuals and community representatives spoke at length about the challenges of public transportation in terms of availability, accessibility, and safety. To their credit, as we shared these research results in various settings and formats, the employers we spoke with could see the importance of access to transportation. This is a tangible example of the blind spots we all hold; in the Four Stages of Competence model (Meyer, 2025), we begin in *unconscious incompetence* (i.e., we don't know what we don't know); this reinforces the need for ongoing training and discussion related to all aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The first recommendation coming from this research, therefore, is to *Get Real* - about the barriers to employment success situated within individuals and also those within the interconnected systems that

surround them. We can't address these barriers if we disagree on what they are or even whether or not they exist. As such, the following Skills for Success are essential for all involved: Collaboration, Communication, Problem Solving, and Reading.

Make it Personal

Throughout the interviews, focus groups, research team meetings, and post-project discussions, each member of the research team engaged in deep reflection about our own roles in the disconnects, as well as the roles of employers, policy makers, and the career development professionals (CDPs) who work tirelessly to support their diverse clients to achieve employment success. We recognized that even if service providers collectively represent diversity in lived experiences and backgrounds, all are still influenced by a colonial system. As such, CDPs may be viewed as the gatekeepers to training and/or employment. This is a power differential that can be difficult to overcome amidst a history of mistrust or either a perceived or real lack of understanding of rural realities.

Within the context of the current study, most CDPs' work is subject to the oversight and funding of the Government of Canada either directly or through the Labour Market Transfer Agreements (LMTAs). Many perceive a push to get people back to work quickly, resulting in limited time to support diverse individuals who have complex needs in order to become successfully and sustainably employed. Our respondents (i.e., individuals, employers, and service providers) shared their frustrations with bureaucratic systems that seemed, at times, to put up more barriers than supports. For example, some individuals with disabling conditions felt penalized by systems withholding their benefits if they worked too many hours during a single pay period, even though they were trying to help their employer by being a "good" employee.

Although CDPs may not be able to make widespread systemic change, at least not immediately, they do have the power to make small, meaningful changes that can impact their communities. Our second recommendation, therefore, is to *Make it Personal*. We invite CDPs, employers, and community leaders to examine some of the root causes of the diversity disconnect, and to identify a starting point that is within your own sphere of influence and capacity to address. Relationship building is a critical part of this process; it is through open discussion about diverse perspectives that systemic barriers and misconceptions will be revealed and can be addressed. Relevant Skills for Success include Adaptability, Creativity and Innovation, and Problem Solving.

Stay Diligent

Despite a realistic understanding of the diversity disconnect and a personal commitment to making things better, there is also a need to constantly monitor and evaluate the impact of any change efforts. This is in part to assess progress and ensure changes have had the intended impact; it is also in part to attend to the inherently chaotic environments within which all systems exist. Inviting ongoing feedback from multiple perspectives (e.g., jobseekers, employees, employers, community leaders, CDPs) will help to continue to bridge the diversity connect within rural communities. Discover and document what's working, what's not, and what do folks wish they had access to for support? Ongoing check-ins will also surface the unanticipated and unintentional consequences of changes; within complex ever-changing systems, changes to one part inevitably have consequences elsewhere. For that reason, our third recommendation is to *Stay Diligent*, activating the following Skills for Success: Adaptability, Communication, Creativity and Innovation, Digital, Numeracy, Problem Solving, and Reading.

Work Together

Ongoing consultation and developing synergistic partnerships are particularly important in rural and remote communities where limited resources impact any individual organization's ability to address complex needs and challenges. Solutions and services that are appropriate for densely populated urban settings may not

seamlessly port over to rural contexts; partnerships may help to stretch funding through sharing space, staff, and specialized skills and equipment.

Project-based funding models for many community services and resources also impact sustainability. There are numerous examples of one organization losing project funding to another competitor, who then starts from scratch in setting up space, purchasing furniture and supplies, hiring new staff, and creating an online presence. Aside from such tangible components, there is an accompanying loss of knowledge – of key contacts in the local community, the needs of specific clients, and the historical reasons for why things have been done the way they are. It also takes time to build new relationships – with clients and with community members.

For all these reasons, our fourth recommendation is to Work Together. Through informal collaboration and more formal partnerships, smaller organizations with niche services can contribute to larger projects to meet identified priority needs for the community. They'll need the following Skills for Success: Collaboration, Creativity and Innovation, Problem Solving, and Reading.

Get Loud

Our research revealed 20 categories impacting the employment success of diverse individuals, and each of those categories comprised factors that both helped and hindered their chances to succeed. The participants (job seekers, community service providers, employees, and employers) who so generously shared their stories with us expressed gratitude that someone was finally taking the time to listen to them. In every community, there are similar stories to be shared. We encourage CDPs to share their own stories of success and challenges as they advocate for change, documenting and disseminating information that extends beyond what's mandatory to collect. There are many examples of the stories from the *Diversity Disconnect* research project in the full report (Free Rein Associates, n.d.) and at https://diversityatwork.ca. As researchers, we feel a responsibility to handle these stories with respect - the same respect that research participants were seeking in their employment journeys.

With an ethical, trauma-informed approach, and the willingness to engage in deep listening, CDPs can provide space for their clients to share their own stories. For that reason, our final recommendation is to *Get Loud*. Your advocacy role can be to amplify their message, not tell the story for them, employing the following Skills for Success: Communication, Creativity & Innovation, Digital, and Writing.

Limitations

An obvious limitation to this study is also its strength – it was situated within very small rural communities, each with unique contexts, and it focussed primarily on the needs of specific groups of people (i.e., Indigenous Peoples and individuals with disabling conditions) to get and keep good jobs within those communities. The qualitative components of the research are not intended to be generalizable, and the quantitative components represent a very specific context. However, the results have resonated with individuals living in other rural communities, far beyond Canada, and with individuals living with disabilities, even in urban centres in Southeast Asia. This suggests that further research, either replicating this study in different communities or with different underrepresented groups or extending the study by focussing more deeply on any of the 20 categories that were identified would help to build a bigger bridge to address the diversity disconnect that is so prevalent and persistent across contexts and cultures.

Conclusion

Bringing together diverse voices, perspectives, and ways of understanding the employment landscape will inevitably bring conflict. Each individual draws conclusions, makes decisions, and prioritizes needs through the filter of lived experiences and values that inform meaning-making – meaning that is inherently tied to cultural dimensions and influential systems. However, there is common ground to be found. This research identified 20 specific categories that can either help or hinder the employment success of diverse

individuals within rural and remote communities. With the exception of Transportation, each of those categories were mentioned by each group of participants in the study (i.e., jobseekers, employees, employers, and community service providers). There was wide recognition of limited resources within many of the small businesses and not-for-profit organizations that employ people within rural and remote communities. For the most part, the changes people were asking for did not have high or unreasonable price tags attached. Many, in fact, simply involved a willingness to acknowledge the diversity disconnect – and to deal with it. Our findings confirmed that within rural communities, there are many individuals willing and able to work, in some cases with a need for minor accommodations, and there were employers desperately seeking good workers. The disconnect often involved misperceptions, misunderstanding, and/or miscommunication. The Skill for Success prioritized by all participant groups was Communication; clearly a key to bridging the disconnect is to talk – and to listen. Just as individuals had stories to tell, so did employers and community service providers. Providing ongoing opportunities to share needs and to work together to resolve them for the benefit of all in the community will help to build sustainable solutions.

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Who am I as a Future Professional? Examining Professional Identity Status Across Demographics in STEMM Undergraduates

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Abstract

In 2015, Mancini et al. validated and published the Professional Identity Status Questionnaire (PISQ-5d). This survey uses five factors to measure how an individual identifies themselves within their chosen field of profession. In recent years, the survey has been modified and adopted for use in other fields such as nursing and social work, and among students in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Pre-Medical (STEMM) programs. For this study, the PISQ-5d survey was utilized to investigate how undergraduate students at a Hispanic-serving institution identify themselves as future professionals in their field. The results of this study aim to understand further how students of different backgrounds relate to being a future professional in their field by comparing the identity statuses of the students based on a multitude of demographic and academic data including gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, admission, STEM degree program including pre-medical students (STEMM), class standing, first-generation classification, and financial need. The results of this study show multiple statistically significant differences between students of various demographics. This study also shows how this survey can be used to identify STEMM individuals who may have deficits in professional or career development as they work towards becoming future professionals in their field.

Keywords: professional identity, identity status, PISQ-5d, underrepresented demographics

Professional identity is defined as a dynamic and cognitive process surrounding the perception of inclusion in a social group of individuals who share specific technical and work-related knowledge (Gondim, 2016). The formation of a professional identity is said to be a constant process of construction and revision. This process is heavily emphasized during undergraduate studies at secondary education institutions due to the variety of professional fields students are exposed to (Carvalho et al., 2021). STEM identity (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) is similar to professional identity but narrows the scope to include only STEM-based professions. Studies have been published on the formation of professional identity and the methods used to measure it across various professions, such as in social work (Carvalho et al., 2021) and nursing (Philippa et al., 2021). As research regarding professional identity has become more popular, there has been an increasing number of publications investigating the professional identities of individuals in the field of education, including teachers and students in a variety of disciplines such as medicine, engineering, and other STEM fields (Conn et al., 2015; Goldie, 2012; Head & Wilson, 2025; Karaolis & Philippou, 2019; Kelly et al., 2020). Multiple studies have highlighted the importance of the development of a strong engineering identity and its relationship with student persistence through an engineering degree track (Beam et al., 2009; Pierrakos et al., 2009; Verdín, 2021).

Attrition and Career Readiness in Underrepresented Demographics

In 2013, a report revealed high attrition rates of students pursuing STEM degrees. This report concluded that the attrition rate for students beginning a STEM bachelor's (four-year) degree was 48% and was even higher at 69% for a STEM associate (two-year) degree (Chen, 2013). Almost half of the students who pursued a STEM bachelor's degree did not complete that degree. The STEM attrition rate is stated to be higher for historically underrepresented groups, including but not limited to women, Black/African American, and Hispanic individuals (Chang et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2010; Hill et al., 1990). One publication found that the rate of African American and Hispanic students leaving the STEM degree program was higher than that of White students (Riegle-Crumb et al., 2019). This study also concluded that African American and Hispanic students were more likely to leave a degree program and pursue a degree in a different field than White students. Unfortunately, students leaving a degree program to pursue a separate profession that

better represents students who "look like them" is not uncommon (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019; Ganley et al., 2018). These findings highlight a lack of persistence in STEM majors at a time when it is needed the most. It is predicted that there will be 3.5 million jobs in various STEM fields by the year 2025; however, there are concerns that as many as two million of these jobs will be left without qualified STEM professionals to fill them (Coykendall, 2024). Collectively, these findings are a small part of a larger concern in science education regarding historically underrepresented groups in STEM and the effects this under-representation has on how these individuals see themselves as future professionals in STEM (Blickenstaff, 2005; McGee & Bentley, 2017).

There has been an increase in the belief that students currently enrolled in an undergraduate program need to develop a wide breadth of knowledge, skills, and resources to increase their chances of being successful in their future career (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Preparing for a career path can present a unique set of challenges for some students, particularly for historically underrepresented gender or racial demographic groups, students from low-income households, and first-generation college students (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Thomas, 2014). Universities have been increasingly viewed as playing a major role in hosting opportunities for all students to develop the skills necessary to market themselves as employable and career-ready (Daniels & Brooker, 2014; McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). However, multiple survey results from 2017-2018 reveal that less than half of college students feel their higher education has sufficiently prepared them for joining the workforce (Green et al., 2023). Studies have continuously utilized identity when investigating career readiness in practitioners who have been engaged in their professional roles due to the perceived link between identity, career readiness, and career performance, including professional identity (Kalbfleisch & Burwell, 2007; Mitin et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2017). If measures of professional identity can be used to identify individuals who are at risk of not feeling ready for their future careers, then a unique opportunity for higher education arises to target at-risk STEM individuals and increase their career readiness. This can potentially increase the number of future STEM professionals available and reduce the overwhelming number of vacancies in STEM careers that are currently predicted (Coykendall, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

For this study, identity is defined as the collective meaning assigned to individuals who belong to specific societal roles or social groups (Burke & Stets, 2022). Professional identity focuses on individuals who belong to specific professional groups. This research views identity through the identity status model (Crocetti et al., 2014; Marcia, 1966). This model states that identity is constructed through three main constructs. The first construct, commitment, describes the decision an individual makes about an identity domain before engaging in the identity space (Marcia, 1966). The second construct, called exploration, refers to the comprehensive search of information about the identity domain with respect to the values, beliefs, and goals an individual wishes to pursue (Mancini et al., 2015; Marcia, 1966). The last part of the model is the reconsideration of commitment, which is the degree to which an individual contemplates replacing their current commitment with an alternative one when the current commitment is no longer satisfactory to the identity of the person (Crocetti et al., 2014).

In 2015, Mancini et al. created, validated, and published the Professional Identity Status Questionnaire (PISQ-5d). The 20-question survey is used to measure how an individual identifies themselves using a five-factor model consisting of both measures of identity and measures of behavior, the latter being included due to the high correlations between identity and work-related behaviors (Mancini & Montali, 2009; Meyer et al., 2006). The five factors were derived from the three constructs in the published literature of Marcia and Crocetti. The definitions of the resulting five measures in the five-factor model and how they relate to the three constructs are below:

1. Commitment.
    - **affirmation**: The significance and sense of accomplishment a person assigns to their place as a member of a professional group (Mancini et al., 2015).
    - **identification with commitment**: The extent to which an individual identifies themselves with their commitment (Meeus et al., 2002).

2. Exploration.
    - **in-depth exploration**: How much an individual actively reflects and seeks out information regarding their current commitments (Meeus et al., 2002).
    - **practices**: Behavioral measurement of the extent to which an individual engages in actions directly relevant to their profession of choice (Mancini et al., 2015).

3. Reconsideration of Commitment.
    - **reconsideration of commitment:** The extent to which an individual contemplates revising current commitments if they are no longer satisfactory (Crocetti et al., 2008).

These five factors defined above are evaluated using the 20 Likert-scale questions in the PISQ-5d survey. Each factor is measured using four unique Likert-scale questions. The responses from each of those four questions are aggregated together, resulting in a single score for an individual factor. Students' average scores for each of the five factors are then collectively analyzed using statistical analyses and cluster analysis techniques to classify them as belonging to one of five distinct identity statuses. These identity statuses provide insight into how a student identifies as a future professional in their chosen career field. These five identity statuses have been published and discussed in the literature from the works of Erikson, Marcia, and Crocetti et al. (Crocetti et al., 2008; Erikson, 1956; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 1980). Mancini first introduced the names of the five identity statuses with the original publication of the survey instrument, and these names have been used in various analyses of identity since their release (Head & Wilson, 2025; Kelly et al., 2020; Mancini et al., 2015; Türksoy, 2021). For this study, updated definitions from the literature will be used to define the identity statuses with slight modifications to better represent how the identity statuses explain how the individuals identify as future professionals in their field (Crocetti et al., 2013; Mancini et al., 2015; Meeus et al., 2002).

- **Achievement:** Students in this identity status have explored, experienced, and committed to their future profession. These individuals score highly in the commitment and exploration factors while scoring low in the factor of reconsideration of commitment.

- **Moratorium**: Students in this identity status are actively seeking out information regarding future professions in hopes of committing to a future profession but have not done so yet. Students with this identity status have high scores in the exploration factors and reconsideration factors and low scores in the commitment factors.

- **Searching Moratorium**: Students in this identity status have explored and committed to a future profession; however, the student now considers the future profession unsatisfactory. This identity status is stated to represent individuals who alternate between the moratorium and achievement identity statuses (Mancini et al., 2015). Students with this identity status score highly in all five measured factors.

- **Diffusion**: Students with this identity status have little experience thinking of themselves as future professionals and may not feel an active commitment to any future profession. These students are not actively looking for an alternative future profession to pursue. Individuals in the diffusion identity status score low in all five factors.

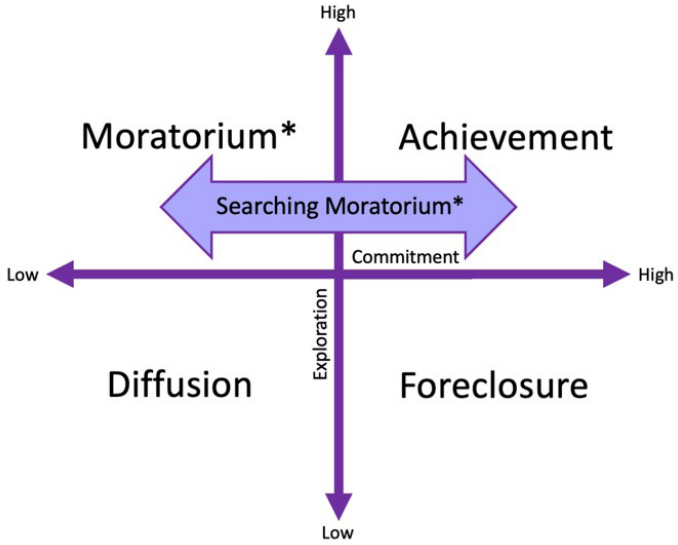
- **Foreclosure**: Students in this identity status have made an active commitment towards a future profession without having explored other options. Students in the foreclosure identity status score high in the commitment factors but low in the exploration and reconsideration factors.

Figure 1 differentiates the five identity statuses based on the three constructs of the identity status model. Searching moratorium is shown as an arrow between moratorium and achievement due to Mancini's

description that the searching moratorium identity status "characterizes individuals who vacillate between the moratorium and achievement identity statuses." (Mancini et al., 2015)

Figure 1

Graphic representing the Five Identity Statuses



Note. Graphic representing the five identity statuses based on the three-factor groups in the identity status model theory. Identity statuses marked with an asterisk represent high reconsideration of commitment, and those without an asterisk represent low reconsideration of commitment. For reference, individuals in the moratorium identity status exhibit low commitment, high exploration, and high reconsideration of commitment (Mancini et al., 2015).

Professional Identity in STEMM

This study views identity using the ideas and perspectives of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966, 1980), who discuss "adolescence" as a period where an individual's identity is explored and formed. From this perspective, it can be said that individuals pursuing secondary education to prepare for a future profession are also in a period of identity exploration and formation. Previous studies regarding the formation of an individual's identity in science-related industries, referred to as science identity, have found that a strong science identity can have a positive impact on an individual's decision to join a science occupation during formative developmental periods of an individual's life (Stets et al., 2017; Vincent-Ruz & Schunn, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to promote the formation of a strong professional identity during a student's college experience.

Professional identity has been investigated in postsecondary education students using the PISQ-5d survey; however, these studies limit the comparisons of demographics to male and female gender identity only (Gamliel et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020). There is a gap in the literature investigating other factors with the PISQ-5d that have been discussed as having an impact on professional identity. These factors include gender identity (including outside of the gender binary), racial identity, admission pathway, STEM discipline, students who are first in their family to attend a postsecondary institution (First Generation), and students considered to be in financial need (Araojo & Ayoobi, 2024; Costello, 2005; Hult et al., 2003; Maccubbin, 2023; Van De Mieroop & Clifton, 2012; Vieira et al., 2017; Waterman et al., 1974). Evaluating student professional identity is crucial for identifying gaps in the development of career readiness among undergraduate students. This career readiness development comes at a pivotal time when students are building the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for successful career entry and growth (Carvalho et al., 2021; Kondratyuk et al., 2024). Identifying gaps in professional identity development can lead to further research, potentially resulting in targeted support strategies that aid the individuals who need it the most. This knowledge can facilitate discussion on what can be done to better support STEMM students in the formation of their professional identity as they prepare themselves for their future careers to increase persistence in STEMM degree programs. This led to the two research questions guiding this study:

1. How do students at a public research-intensive institution of higher education identify as future professionals in their field?
2. What differences exist between students of various demographics as it pertains to their professional identity?

Methods

Survey

This study utilized a modified PISQ-5d questionnaire to collect information about STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Pre-Medical) students' professional identity. In this study, "pre-medical" refers to students enrolled in a specific degree track aimed to prepare them for medical school (i.e., "pre-med" students). This questionnaire includes 20 Likert-scale questions with a response of 1 meaning "not at all" and a response of 5 meaning "very much." The PISQ-5d was originally designed to measure undergraduate psychology students' professional identity. For this study, the wording was modified by replacing the word "psychologist" with "professional in your field." The Likert scale survey and optional demographic questions can be found in Supplemental A. Demographic questions were included to gather more information about the participants' gender identity, racial identity, admission status, and declared degree program. The survey was distributed to six chemistry-based courses at a large Hispanic-Serving Research Institution. Those courses included General Chemistry I, Organic Chemistry I, Chemistry for Engineers, Introduction to Forensic Science, Forensic Crime Scene Investigation, and Geology. The survey was distributed to students online approximately two weeks after the semester began.

Participants

There were 351 complete responses to the survey. Several demographic questions included in the survey asked students to self-report their current gender and racial identities, admission pathway to the university, and their declared degree path. All demographic questions, including participant name and email address, were optional. For students who opted to give this information, the university's Institutional Knowledge Management (IKM) was utilized to confirm admission pathways and declared degree paths, as well as gather more information, such as class standing, first-generation status, and financial needs. When IKM could not gather the information for select participants, the students' self-reported responses were used. Participant sections for admission, class standing, first-generation status, and financial need can be found in Supplemental B.

Gender Identity

Of the 351 students who completed the survey, 190 identified themselves as cisgender female, 145 students identified themselves as cisgender male, and 14 students identified themselves as either transgender or gender non-conforming individual (TGNC). Of these 14 students, seven identified as non-binary and seven identified themselves as transgender male. Two students chose not to disclose their gender identity and, as such, were not included in the analysis for gender identity but were included in other group analyses.

Racial Identity

The 351 students who completed the survey were classified as one of five racial or ethnic identities: Black/African American, Asian/Asian American, Hispanic, White, or Mixed-Underrepresented. For students who identified as two or more races or ethnicities, priority was given to marginalized groups (Fink et al., 2023). There were 11 individuals who either did not disclose their racial or ethnic identity or were part of a racial identity in which the sample size was not large enough for analysis. Of the 351 students who answered the survey, 20 students were categorized as Black/African American, 43 students were categorized as Asian/Asian American, 90 students were categorized as Hispanic, 170 students were categorized as White, and 17 students were categorized as Mixed-Underrepresented.

Declared Degree Program

Students who completed this survey reported a wide variety of degree programs. To be able to include as many as possible for analysis, these degree programs were grouped based on their STEMM status. Of these groups, 147 students were studying in a science degree program, 99 were in an engineering degree program, and 87 were in a pre-medical degree program. Additionally, 13 students were studying degree programs not included in STEMM, and one student was studying a math degree program. However, these two groups were not included in the analyses of STEMM degree programs as the sample size of each degree program group was too small. Overall, 333 students were included in this part of the analysis.

Procedure

Cluster Analysis

Following the completion of the semester, the survey responses from all sampled courses were aggregated into one SPSS dataset. Data validation in the form of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using the original model was performed before running the cluster analysis procedure, both of which are described by Mancini (Mancini et al., 2015). The results of the CFA analysis can be found in Supplemental G.

First, Hierarchical Cluster Analysis is used to produce a dendrogram, which, alongside other criteria such as the Calinski-Harabasz index, silhouette criterion, Akaike and Bayesian Information Criterion (AIC and BIC), was used to select the optimal number of clusters. Once the number was determined, K-means cluster analysis was conducted using the results from the Hierarchical cluster analysis as the initial cluster centers. This study followed the procedure of the original publication (Mancini et al., 2015). Once the K-means cluster analysis was complete, the data was analyzed quantitatively using Chi-Square analysis and Kruskal-Wallis H Test.

Chi-Square Analysis

Pearson chi-square analysis was conducted to compare the proportion of students of specific demographics who identify with a particular identity status. This analysis was realized using contingency tables. For contingency tables with groups of small sample sizes, Fischer's Exact test using a Monte Carlo simulation to approximate the p-value was utilized. For these simulations, a seed number was randomly generated and used for all simulations. This seed number is 110194448. This analysis aimed to determine if any specific demographic identified significantly more or less with one identity status over another. Since the contingency table was used to investigate multiple comparisons, the Bonferroni test correction was implemented to lower the probability of a Type I error (Armstrong, 2014). The effect size was calculated using Cramer's V measurement (Cramér, 1946) with Cohen's interpretation (Cohen, 1988). For the post-hoc analysis, multiple comparisons using a two-proportion z-test were conducted as needed.

Kruskal-Wallis H Test

A Kruskal-Wallis H Test was utilized to compare the students' aggregated and averaged scores with each other. This analysis aimed to determine if students of a specific type of demographic were reporting significantly higher scores in one or more of the five factors than other students in that demographic, as opposed to comparing students based on their identity status. Similar to the chi-square analysis, the Bonferroni test correction was utilized to reduce the probability of a Type I error (Armstrong, 2014). A Mann-Whitney U test is used as an alternative if there are only two groups within any demographic. Post-hoc analysis was completed as needed for Kruskal-Wallis H analyses using multiple pairwise Dunn tests to determine statistically significant pairings.

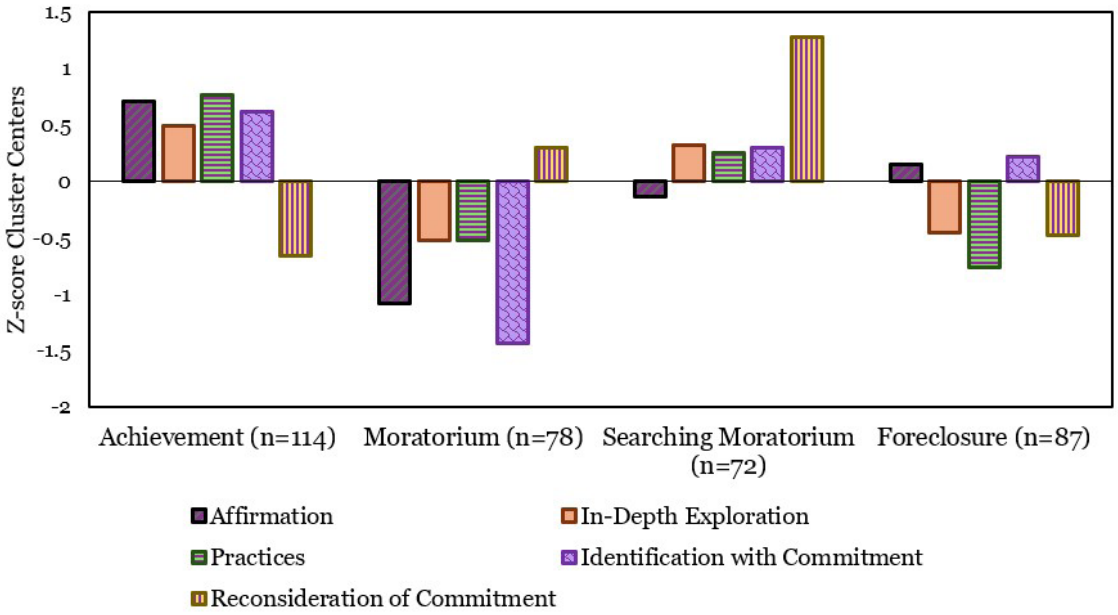
Results

Cluster Analysis

Using a dendrogram, Calinski-Harabasz index, silhouette criterion, AIC, and BIC, it was determined that the appropriate number of clusters for the dataset was a four-cluster solution. Therefore, K-means cluster analysis was run with the preselection of four clusters. Four of the established identity statuses could be recognized: Achievement, Moratorium, Searching Moratorium, and Foreclosure. When testing a five-cluster solution, the remaining fifth cluster was determined to mirror the Moratorium identity status. No cluster representing the Diffusion identity status emerged from the data after completing the cluster analysis procedure. The cluster centers of each factor regarding each of the four identity statuses are shown in Figure 2. These cluster centers are shown using standardized scores to more easily represent a "high" ($z > 0.2$), "medium" ($|z| \leq 0.2$), and "low" ($z < -0.2$) cluster center.

Figure 2

Cluster Centers for Each Factor in the Four Identity Statuses.



Note: Red (diagonal stripe) bars represent the cluster center score for the factor of affirmation in each of the four identity statuses. Orange (light grey) bars represent the cluster center score for the factor in-depth exploration. Green (horizontal stripe) bars represent the cluster center for the practice factor. Purple (dark grey) bars represent the cluster center for the identification with commitment factor. Yellow (vertical stripe) bars represent the cluster center for the factor reconsideration of commitment in each of the four identity statuses.

Achievement

The achievement identity status shows students with high scores in the categories of affirmation, practice, and identification with commitment, and in-depth exploration, and a low score in the category of reconsideration of commitment. This is consistent with the results of Mancini (Mancini et al., 2015) and Kelly (Kelly et al., 2020) on the achievement identity status. Out of the 351 students who took the PISQ-5d survey, 114 students identified with the achievement identity status.

Moratorium

The moratorium identity status represents students who score high in the factors of reconsideration of commitment and low in the factors of affirmation, in-depth exploration, practices, and identification with commitment. This is slightly different than Mancini's results, which show students with this identity status scoring medium in the in-depth exploration factor, but is consistent with Kelly's results (Kelly et al., 2020). Out of 351 students, 78 identify with the moratorium identity status.

Searching Moratorium

This identity status represents students who score high in the factors of in-depth exploration, practices, identification with commitment, and reconsideration of commitment, and score medium in the affirmation factor. This differs from Mancini's original cluster analysis results, which show students scoring low in both affirmation and identification with commitment (Mancini et al., 2015). It also differs from Kelly's cluster analysis results for this cluster (Kelly et al., 2020), which shows students scoring high on all five factors. Out of 351 students, 72 identify with the searching moratorium identity status.

Foreclosure

Students in this identity status scored high in the category of identification with commitment, low in the factors of in-depth exploration, practices, and reconsideration of commitment, and medium in the factor of affirmation. This differs from Mancini's results; the participants in the foreclosure identity status scored low in in-depth exploration and high in practice. These results are very similar to Kelly's results, with the exception that the students in Kelly's study scored high in affirmation instead of medium (Kelly et al., 2020). Out of 351 students, 87 identify with the foreclosure identity status.

Gender Identity

The distributions of identity statuses for the cisgender male, female, and TGNC students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of Student Identity Statuses Based on the Students' Gender Identity

Gender Identity	Achievement	Moratorium	Searching Moratorium	Foreclosure
Cisgender Female (n = 190)	38.4%	17.9%	17.4%	26.3%
Cisgender Male (n = 145)	26.9%	26.9%	22.1%	24.1%
TGNC (n = 14)	14.3%	28.6%	42.9%	14.3%

Fischer's Exact Test

Due to the low sample size of the TGNC student group, Fischer's exact test using a Monte Carlo simulation was used to determine whether how a student identifies as a future professional in their field is independent of gender identity. This contingency table shows statistical significance, with a p-value equal to 0.032. Potential contributions to the significance of this contingency table include the adjusted residual for the cells of female achievement students (2.5) and TGNC searching moratorium students (2.1). This gives evidence

that how students identify as future professionals in their field is not independent of gender identity. Cramer's V was calculated to be 0.139, indicating a small effect size associated with the test, which was also statistically significant at $p = 0.034$. Post-hoc analysis did not reveal any statistically significant pairwise differences.

Kruskal-Wallis H Test

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test show statistically significant differences in the categories of Affirmation ($H(2) = 11.082$, $p = 0.004$), Identification with Commitment ($H(2) = 8.565$, $p = 0.014$), and Reconsideration of Commitment ($H(2) = 9.513$, $p = 0.007$). Pairwise comparisons show significant differences between TGNC and cisgender female students in all three factors mentioned above (adj. $p = 0.003$, 0.028, and 0.020, respectively). These comparisons also show differences between TGNC and cisgender male students in the category of affirmation (adj. $p = 0.015$). More specifically, the TGNC students in this study are reporting lower scores overall regarding the factors of affirmation and lower scores than cisgender female students for identification with commitment. The TGNC students in this study are also reporting higher scores in the factor reconsideration of commitment compared to cisgender male and female students. No statistical differences were found between cisgender male and female students in any of the five factors.

Racial Identity

The distribution of students and how they identify as future professionals in their field based on their racial identity is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Distribution Of Student Identity Statuses Based On The Students' Racial Identity

Racial Identity	Achievement	Moratorium	Searching Moratorium	Foreclosure
Black/African American (n = 20)	10.0%	25.0%	20.0%	45.0%
Asian/Asian American (n = 43)	25.6%	16.3%	44.2%	14.0%
Hispanic (n = 90)	42.2%	15.6%	20.0%	22.2%
White (n = 170)	30.0%	25.9%	15.3%	28.8%
Mixed-Underrepresented (n = 17)	47.1%	35.5%	11.8%	5.9%

Fischer's Exact Test

Due to the low sample size of the Mixed-Underrepresented racial group, Fischer's exact test using a Monte Carlo simulation was used to determine whether how a student identifies as a future professional in their field is independent of racial identity. The results of Fischer's Exact test via Monte Carlo simulation show that how students identify as future professionals in their field is not independent of their racial identity, with a p-value less than 0.001. Cramer's V was calculated to be 0.189. This indicates a medium effect size for a 5x5 contingency table, which is also statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Post-hoc analysis revealed statistically significant pairings comparing the proportion of students of a particular race who identify with each identity status. There is a higher proportion of searching moratorium students who identify as Asian/Asian American compared to the proportion of foreclosure students

(adj. p=0.041), moratorium students (adj. p = 0.005), and achievement students (adj. p = 0.002) who identify as Asian/Asian American.

Kruskal-Wallis H Test

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test show insignificant results for the factors of practice ($H(4)$= 6.777, p = 0.148) and in-depth exploration ($H(4)$ = 6.867, p = 0.143). All other factors show statistically significant differences between the different racial identities: affirmation ($H(4)$ = 10.080, p=0.039), identification with commitment ($H(4)$ = 12.742, p = 0.013), and reconsideration of commitment ($H(4)$= 20.891, p < 0.001).

Post-hoc analysis via Dunn tests shows that although the overall distributions between students of different racial identities are different for the factor of affirmation, there were no individual pairings that were statistically significantly different from each other after adjusting using the Bonferroni correction. When comparing groups based on their scores in the Identification with Commitment category, White and Hispanic students (adj. p = 0.005) were statistically significant. Hispanic students reported higher scores in the factor Identification with Commitment than White students. Lastly, for the factor of Reconsideration of Commitment, two pairs were found to differ from each other significantly: White students and Asian/Asian American students (adj. p < 0.001), and Hispanic students and Asian/Asian American students (adj. p=0.002). To a statistically significant degree, Asian/Asian American students report higher scores in the factor Reconsideration of Commitment than both Hispanic students and White students.

Gender and Racial Identity

Due to the statistically significant differences in how students identify as future professionals in their field between students of different gender identities and between students of different racial identities, it was determined that further investigation was necessary. A three-way contingency table was conducted to determine if there were any statistically significant differences in how students of different racial identity statuses identify as future professionals in their field while controlling for a third variable, gender identity. A Kruskal-Wallis H test was also conducted to compare the distribution of scores for each of the five factors between students of different racial identities, controlling for gender.

Due to the low sample size for TGNC students, only the analysis that controlled for cisgender male and cisgender female students of different racial identities could be interpreted. Monte Carlo simulation was also used due to the low cell counts. When controlling for gender, the cisgender female contingency table comparing students of different racial identity statuses based on how they identify as future professionals in their field revealed statistically significant results (p < 0.001). In contrast, the male contingency table of the same comparison revealed statistically insignificant results with a p-value of 0.527. Further investigation into the comparison of cisgender female students of different racial identity statuses and how they identify as future professionals revealed similar results to the overall comparison of how students of different racial identity statuses identify as future professionals in their field. Contributing the most to the statistically significant contingency table are the female Asian/Asian American students who identify with the searching moratorium identity status (adj. residual = 4.6). The results also show that the proportion of students in the searching moratorium identity status who identify as Asian/Asian American is significantly greater than the proportion of Asian/Asian American students in any other identity status.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis analysis revealed no statistically significant differences when comparing the distributions of scores for each of the five factors for male students of different racial identities. Statistically significant differences between the factor scores of affirmation (p = 0.048) and reconsideration of commitment (p = 0.004) were found between female students of different racial identities. Post-hoc analysis did not reveal any statistically significant pairs between the distribution of affirmation scores, but did find two statistically significant pairwise comparisons between the distribution of reconsideration of commitment scores. It was found that Asian/Asian American students reported statistically significantly higher scores in

the factor of reconsideration of commitment compared to both White students (adj. p = 0.001) and Hispanic students (adj. p = 0.017).

STEMM Degree Program

The distribution of students and how they identify as future professionals in their field based on their declared type of degree program is shown in Table 3. The sample sizes for the declared groups of technology, mathematics, and non-STEMM degree programs were too small for analysis; therefore, only the degree program groups of Science, Engineering, and pre-Medical will be discussed and analyzed.

Table 3

Distribution Of Student Identity Statuses Based On Students Declared STEMM Track

STEMM Major	Achievement	Moratorium	Searching Moratorium	Foreclosure
Science (n = 147)	35.4%	23.1%	14.3%	27.2%
Engineer (n = 99)	25.3%	31.3%	19.2%	24.2%
Pre-Medical (n = 88)	37.9%	9.2%	31.0%	21.8%

Chi-Square Analysis

The results of Pearson's chi-square analysis show that how a student identifies as a professional in their field is not independent of their STEMM degree program ($c2(8, n = 333) = 20.569$, p = 0.001, V=0.180). Potentially contributing to this statistically significant finding are the adjusted residuals for science students that identify with the searching moratorium identity status (-2.4), engineering students that identify with the moratorium status (2.7), engineering students that identify with the achievement identity status (-2.0), pre-medical students that identify with the moratorium identity status (-3.3), and pre-medical students that identify with the searching moratorium identity status (3.0). Cramer's V shows a small effect for a 5x3 contingency table. The post-hoc analysis found that pre-medical students identified with the searching moratorium identity status much more than students enrolled in a science major (p = 0.002).

One hypothesis for this finding is that many students are starting to realize the intensity and difficulty of pursuing a medical profession and are reconsidering whether this is the path they truly desire to take (Freeman et al., 2016). Another hypothesis is that students in pre-medical degree programs have not decided on which specialty they wish to pursue as a medical professional and, therefore, may not be reconsidering becoming a medical professional overall, but only considering or reconsidering what field of medicine they will pursue (Reed et al., 2001). Additionally, it was found that students enrolled in a pre-medical major identify with the moratorium identity status significantly less compared to students enrolled in both science majors and engineering majors.

Kruskal-Wallis H Test

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no statistically significant pairings overall for the factor of identification with commitment only ($H(2) = 4.802$, p = 0.091). There are significant results in the factors of affirmation ($H(2) = 7.091$, p = 0.029), in-depth exploration ($H(2) = 12.771$, p = 0.002), practices ($H(2)=6.123$, p = 0.047) and reconsideration of commitment ($H(2) = 9.700$, p = 0.008). Pairwise comparisons show that

students in a pre-medical degree program are reporting higher scores in the factors of affirmation, in-depth exploration, and practices than students in an engineering degree program (adj. p = 0.026, 0.002, and 0.045, respectively). This gives evidence that students on track to become future medical professionals believe they are exploring and practicing as future medical professionals to a greater extent than students on track to become future engineering professionals do. Also, students on track to become future medical professionals are feeling more affirmed in themselves as future medical professionals than students on track to become future engineering professionals.

Pairwise comparisons also show that students in a pre-medical degree program are reporting higher scores in the factor of in-depth exploration than students in science degree programs (adj. p = 0.021). This shows that pre-medical students are searching for information regarding their future professions more than students on track to become future science professionals believe they are. Lastly, it was found that students in an engineering degree program reported higher scores in the factor of reconsideration of commitment than students in a science degree program (adj. p = 0.007). This shows that students on track to become future engineering professionals are searching for other alternative professions more than students on track to become future science professionals are.

Statistically Insignificant Results

Supplemental C-F contains the results for comparisons and statistical analyses between students of different admission pathways, class standings, First-Generation status, and Pell-Grant eligibility, as well as the methods used to classify the participants as listed above. As these demographics have been discussed in the literature as having an impact on the formation of a professional identity, it was valuable to include them in the analysis and report the findings.

Discussion

Overall, the results show distinct differences in how students of different gender identities, racial identities, and STEMM degree programs identify as future professionals in their fields. There is evidence showing that cisgender male and female students identify differently as future professionals than TGNC students. Proportionally, TGNC students identify with the moratorium status significantly more than cisgender male and female students. The moratorium identity status, in theory, represents students who struggle to commit to a specific field of profession (Mancini et al., 2015). This is also supported by the Kruskal-Wallis comparison for gender, as it was found that TGNC students are also reporting statistically higher scores in the factor of reconsideration of commitment and statistically lower scores in the factors of affirmation and identification with commitment.

These two factors are both related to the commitment one feels towards becoming a future professional, supporting the idea that TGNC students may struggle with committing to becoming a future professional compared to their cisgender male and female peers. These results support previous observations regarding the intersection of gender identity and vocational identity, which discuss how TGNC individuals feel pressured to prioritize either their vocational identity or gender identity due to the anticipation of stigmatization caused by their gender transition, potentially limiting career aspirations and leading to TGNC students dismissing potential career opportunities (Budge et al., 2010; Corlett et al., 2024; Corrigan et al., 2009). This also may be evidence regarding a lack of sense of belonging that students of other gender identity statuses outside cisgender male and female students experience, a topic that has been discussed in previous publications centered around transgender individuals (Beemyn, 2003; McKinney, 2005). Although this study makes no broad claims regarding the professional identity of TGNC students in the TGNC community, the results of this study support the need for further inclusion and research into the STEMM identity of students outside of the gender binary.

There is also evidence showing that Asian/Asian American students proportionally identify more with the searching moratorium identity status compared to other racial identities. Further investigation showed that it was cisgender female Asian/Asian American students. This conclusion is also supported by the significant pairings from the Kruskal-Wallis H test, which showed Asian/Asian American students reporting statistically

higher scores in the factors of In-Depth Exploration and Reconsideration of Commitment. When controlling for gender, similar results were found between the female Asian/Asian American students, but no statistically significant differences were found between male Asian/Asian American students. These results indicate that further research into the professional identity of Asian/Asian American individuals may be needed to support career readiness within this demographic, in particular, female Asian/Asian American students.

For students of different STEMM degree programs, most differences were found regarding students in a pre-medical degree program and students in an engineering degree program. Students in a pre-medical degree program are identifying with the searching moratorium identity status to a statistically significant extent. This is supported by the Kruskal-Wallis H test, showing students in a pre-medical degree program are reporting significantly higher scores than students in science or engineering degree programs for all factors except Identification with Commitment. The current hypothesis for this result surrounds the many disciplines and sub-disciplines of medical-based professions. These students may not be reconsidering becoming a future medical professional outright, but rather reconsidering or are currently still deciding which medical specialty is right for them. Another hypothesis is that students pursuing a medical profession may be at a point in their academic career where they realize the expectations that must be met to be considered for medical school, such as a high GPA, difficult coursework, work-study, research study, etc. Many students may be realizing they cannot meet these high expectations and, as such, may be reconsidering pursuing a career in medicine altogether (Barr et al., 2008).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study centered around two research questions: how do students at this institution identify as future professionals in their field, and what are the differences between students of certain demographic groups? Using the PISQ-5d survey, students were classified as one of four identity statuses, giving insight into how they view themselves as future professionals in their field. Differences within the professional identity of students were found between students of different gender identities, racial identities, and STEMM majors. Demographics with statistically significant scores in the reconsideration of commitment factors, such as TGNC students and Asian/Asian American students, could be at risk of leaving their STEMM major and furthering the divide of underrepresented demographics in STEM careers.

Limitations

There are a few limitations regarding the statistical analyses of this study. The first limitation focuses on the results of the data validation, particularly the Cronbach's Alpha measures. There is a low value of internal consistency for the factors of in-depth exploration and practices. The original publication also recognized and discussed a low value of internal consistency regarding in-depth exploration when the PISQ-5d survey was originally published (Mancini et al., 2015); however, in the original publication, the internal consistency for the factor of practices was within acceptable boundaries as opposed to the internal consistency of practices in this publication. This could be due to the sample for this study, undergraduate students at a large, research-intensive university in the United States, as opposed to psychology students at an Italian university. Approximately half the students surveyed are considered freshman or sophomore students. As practices have been discussed to be more of a behavioral measure, these students may not have had many opportunities to behave professionally. It is hypothesized that these students may still be taking introductory-level courses and, as such, may not have had opportunities to develop or practice many skills relevant to their future profession, unlike junior or senior students who may have had the chance to do so during internships or upper-level laboratory courses.

The second limitation is in the sample size of certain demographic groups. Although this research was conducted at a Hispanic-serving institution, the authors acknowledge that the university serves a large proportion of white students. There is a low sample size for students who identify as a Mixed-Underrepresented racial group and Black/African American, as well as students who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. This may affect the results of some statistical analyses, as there is a

risk when making inferences about larger populations based on a small sample of students (Faber & Fonseca, 2014).

The third limitation of this study regards how it classifies those who are in financial need. The results of this analysis are located in Supplemental F. Students were classified as being in financial need if they qualified for a Federal Pell Grant. However, whether a student qualifies for a Federal Pell Grant is largely dependent on the financial income of the student's family in the form of the "Expected Family Contribution." The authors of this study recognize that there are students who do not qualify for financial assistance through the Federal Pell Grant but are still in need of financial assistance.

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From Options to Choices: Helping Clients Make Better Career Decisions

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Abstract

We are taught reading, mathematics, and driving, yet we are rarely taught how to make decisions. Consequently, many individuals struggle with career choices and seek guidance from career counsellors.

When faced with multiple options—such as colleges, occupations, majors, or jobs—the decision-making process typically involves: (a) identifying promising alternatives, (b) exploring them in depth, and (c) comparing the final options to select the most suitable option. This paper focuses on individuals who have already compiled a shortlist of 3-4 viable alternatives and need guidance in choosing the best one. To address this need, we present *Comparing and Choosing*, an evidence-based framework that career counsellors and practitioners can use to guide clients in systematically comparing and evaluating their final alternatives. We then demonstrate how this framework can be integrated into counselling practice to enrich counselor—client dialogue. Next, we introduce *Compare and Choose*, a free online decision-support system that operationalizes the framework and facilitates the comparison and evaluation of alternatives. Finally, we examine how these tools may enhance counsellors' capacity to assist clients in making better career decisions and identify the conditions of their optimal use.

Keywords: career counselling, career decision making, career decision-support system, PIC, Comparing and Choosing.

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The career one pursues has significant implications for one's lifestyle, well-being, and economic and social status (Pham et al., 2024; Robertson, 2013). Hence, career decisions rank among the most important decisions we make. However, while we are taught how to read, do math, and drive, we are rarely taught how to make decisions. As a result, when faced with career decisions, many individuals turn to career and guidance counsellors or career development practitioners to navigate the process (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008; Fouad et al., 2006). Others turn to self-help resources, including career information and planning websites (Galliott, 2017), which can be used independently or as part of the career counselling process (Whiston et al., 1998).

Making career decisions is a challenging task because it often requires collecting vast amounts of information about many alternatives (e.g., occupations, majors, colleges, and jobs). Furthermore, the contemporary world of work – characterized by rapid technological advances and digitalization (Nordin & Mathew, 2024) – requires individuals to make career decisions more frequently, and often with incomplete information. Additionally, unclear personal characteristics and uncertain future preferences further complicate the decision-making process (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021).

Career counselling typically begins by forming a working alliance with the client (Whiston et al., 2016). Then, the counsellor often assists the client in getting to know themselves. Savickas (2012) and Hartung (2013) highlight narrative and developmental perspectives that help individuals construct coherent career stories and integrate their career with multiple life roles, while Blustein (2013) underscores the social and economic contexts that shape opportunities through the psychology of working. These views, further synthesized by Savickas and Guichard (2016), frame career as a dynamic, evolving process integrated with personal identity, social context, and multiple life roles rather than a one-time decision.

Despite variations among different approaches, the career counselling process ultimately involves making a decision. Decision-making typically focuses on the choice among several alternatives. When the number of career options is large, narrowing them down to a manageable list of promising career alternatives becomes inevitable. Then, during a joint in-depth exploration of these options – often using online career information systems like the JOBBANK or O*NET – some promising alternatives that do not match the client's preferred attributes are likely to be eliminated. The final stage is to evaluate and compare the remaining alternatives to identify the most suitable option. Other clients come with a shortlist already prepared and need guidance only in the final comparison. In both cases, the counsellor's role is to guide clients through the challenging process of evaluating and comparing the final alternatives to find the most suitable one.

In this paper, we aim to enrich career counsellors' repertoire of approaches and tools for supporting clients who have already compiled a shortlist of final alternatives. We begin with a brief review of career decision-making models and introduce the decision-theory-based *PIC* model (Prescreening, In-depth exploration, and Choice; Gati & Asher, 2001). We focus on the model's final stage, *Choice*, which seeks to identify the most suitable alternative from the shortlist, and present the *Comparing and Choosing* framework, designed to operationalize this objective. This framework guides a systematic attribute-by-attribute evaluation of the finalists to determine the best fit, using a multidimensional compensatory model that assumes an alternative's advantages can offset its shortcomings (Bell et al., 1988).

Next, we introduce *Compare & Choose*, a free online decision-support system that implements the proposed framework. We suggest ways to incorporate both the *Comparing and Choosing* framework and the *Compare & Choose* decision-support system into career counselling. The Discussion addresses practical considerations for incorporating them into career counselling and examines the benefits and challenges of applying the proposed framework and system with clients from diverse sociocultural backgrounds.

Career Decision Making

Our approach is rooted in the notion that career choices are the outcome of a decision-making process, traceable to Parsons's (1909) principles: *Know yourself, know the world of work*, and combine them through *true reasoning*. Zytowski (2008) pointed out that Parsons never delineated the meaning of true reasoning, and suggests that *career decision-making* should be considered its modern equivalent. Fifty years ago, Jepsen and Dilley (1974) reviewed eight vocational decision-making models and compared them from a decision-theory perspective. Later, Harren (1979, p. 119) proposed that "a decision-making model is a description of a psychological process in which one organizes information, deliberates among alternatives, and makes a commitment to a course of action."

The concept of career decision-making has gained increasing prominence in vocational psychology, with Walsh and Osipow's (1988) book *Career Decision Making* representing a key milestone. More recently, Lent and Brown (2020) suggest that career choice counselling addresses both the content – the options under consideration, and the process of choosing – how individuals decide among those options.

While these accounts stem from an analytic, information-focused cognitive view, a parallel literature highlights embodied, affective, and narrative ways of knowing – for example, somatic markers and the *felt sense* (Damasio, 1994; Gendlin, 1981). Likewise, life-design approaches invite clients to craft narratives that weave affect, identity, and meaning into coherent plots (Savickas, 2013). Such embodied and narrative forms of knowing can be supplemented by a systematic analysis, and their integration may yield more satisfying decisions (Maree, 2020). Hence, while we focus on systematic comparison and evaluation, we refer to the potential benefits of integrating these approaches in the Discussion.

Several models have been developed to guide career decision-making. While all of them divide the complex process into sequential stages, they differ in their purpose, essence, and number of stages (ranging from three to nine). Studies indicate that interventions based on such models can improve decision readiness and career decision-making self-efficacy (Björnsdóttir et al., 2011; Brown, 2015), as well as increase career decisiveness, exploration, and vocational identity (Hirschi & Läge, 2008). Gati and Kulcsár (2021) reviewed six prominent models (*DECIDES*, Krumboltz & Hamel, 1977; *CASVE*, Peterson et al., 1996; *PIC*, Gati & Asher, 2001; Van Esbroeck et al., 2005; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006; Hirschi & Läge, 2007) and found that while

some models omit essential stages of the decision-making process, others are overly complex or include ambiguously defined stages, limiting their applicability in both counselling contexts and independent use. In comparing the stages outlined by the various models, Gati and Kulcsár (2021) note that the *PIC* model (Prescreening, In-depth Exploration, and Choice; Gati & Asher, 2001) offers a concise and structured sequence of three stages that incorporates the core elements common to most career decision-making models.

The following section explains the *PIC* stages and reviews empirical evidence supporting their validity. Next, we introduce *Comparing and Choosing*, a decision-theory-based framework that supports the *Choice* stage by guiding the systematic evaluation of the shortlisted alternatives to identify the most suitable one.

Prescreening, In-Depth Exploration, and Choice (PIC)

Gati and Asher (2001) introduced the *PIC* framework, which offers a structured method for integrating personal and career information to identify the most suitable career option. *PIC* divides the decision-making process into three distinct stages – *Prescreening, In-depth exploration*, and *Choice*, each with specific goals, steps, and outcomes. Without a structured process, individuals may struggle to begin career decision-making, lose momentum, or make choices misaligned with their goals and preferences (Gati et al., 1996). Before detailing the steps of the *Choice* stage, we briefly outline the *Prescreening* and *In-depth exploration* stages that precede it. A more comprehensive description and discussion of the three stages of *PIC* can be found in Gati and Asher (2001).

Prescreening

The objective is to identify a manageable set of promising career alternatives that warrant further exploration. Individuals first need to identify the career-related criteria most important to them (e.g., prospects for professional advancement, variety of tasks, use of analytical skills, and teamwork; Gati & Asher, 2001; Lent & Brown, 2020). At this point, the counsellor may help clarify any key, non-negotiable criteria. Then, by applying the sequential elimination method (Gati et al., 1995), alternatives are evaluated one criterion at a time, starting with the most critical. At each step, alternatives that do not meet the selected criterion are eliminated. This process proceeds in descending order of criterion importance until a small and manageable set of alternatives remains (typically 7 ± 2; Gati et al., 2003; Gutentag et al., 2024; Miller, 1956). This set of promising alternatives becomes the starting point for the next stage – *In-depth exploration*.

In-depth Exploration

This stage focuses on confirming which of the promising alternatives are not only suitable for the individual but also feasible. A detailed evaluation of each remaining alternative is conducted, considering: (a) its alignment with the characteristics of the individual's ideal career, including attributes initially regarded as less critical, (b) the individual's willingness and ability to meet the core demands of the career (e.g., shift work for paramedics), (c) the feasibility of being admitted to the required education or training, and (d) the likelihood of securing employment in the chosen field. Typically, additional alternatives are ruled out during this stage, narrowing the list to approximately three (±1) final options that are not only promising but also realistic and viable (Gati & Asher, 2001).

Choice

The *In-depth exploration* stage rarely yields a single suitable option. Instead, it typically produces a shortlist of two to four alternatives appropriate for the individual, making it necessary to determine the most suitable one. The *Choice* stage entails a systematic comparison of the final options to determine the best one, as described in more detail in the following section (Gati & Asher, 2001), or to rank the remaining alternatives when implementation of the top choice is uncertain.

Support for the *PIC* model

Empirical support for the *PIC* model has been documented in several studies (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021; Gati & Levin, 2015). Its core pillar – attribute-based career preferences across all three stages of *PIC* – has demonstrated reliability and validity (Gati et al., 2006; Gati & Gutentag, 2015). The *Prescreening* stage is supported by findings showing that individuals who applied sequential elimination and selected one of the recommended occupations reported greater satisfaction with their occupational choice six years later (Gati et al., 2006). The *In-depth exploration* stage is validated by evidence that, once unsuitable options are excluded, individuals conduct more thorough evaluations of the remaining alternatives (Gati & Tikotzki, 1989). Regarding the *Choice* stage, research indicates that many individuals tend to select the option most closely aligned with their ideal career (Zakay & Barak, 1984; Medin et al., 1995) and perceive systematic, analytical comparisons as helpful in decision making (Amit & Gati, 2013). Chernev (2003) found that when an alternative matches – or comes closest to – one's ideal alternative, the decision process is simplified and preference for that option increases. A comprehensive description of the *PIC* model, together with its empirical support, is provided by Gati (2023).

Guiding Individuals Through the *Choice* Stage

The *Choice* stage involves systematically comparing alternatives to determine the most suitable option. A practical method for this purpose is the application of a multi-attribute (i.e., multi-criteria) compensatory model (Pitz & Harren, 1980; Sauermann, 2005; von Winterfeldt & Edwards, 1986). Each career alternative is quantitatively evaluated against a set of attributes or criteria relevant to the individual (e.g., income, prospects for professional advancement, autonomy, teamwork, use of numerical abilities, and absence of shift work). The overall suitability of an alternative is estimated by summing these evaluations, thereby reflecting the extent to which its characteristics align with the individual's desired or ideal levels on each attribute (e.g., the individual prefers working *only indoors,* whereas the alternative involves working *mostly indoors)*. This process helps individuals select the option that best corresponds with their desired characteristics (Katz, 1966; von Winterfeldt & Edwards, 1986) or that most closely resembles their *dream job* (Zakay & Barak, 1984).

Although translating judgments into numbers may seem counterintuitive, individuals actually make such trade-offs routinely in everyday life. For example, choosing a rental apartment requires weighing multiple attributes of varying importance, such as monthly rent, commute time, neighborhood safety, parking availability, and whether it includes an extra bedroom or balcony. Deciding whether an additional bedroom justifies an extra C$400 per month and a 15-minute longer commute illustrates the daily compensatory evaluations that formal models are designed to capture. Quantification does not create these trade-offs; it simply makes them explicit.

Building on this rationale, C*omparing and Choosing* is an evidence-based, decision-theory-informed framework that adapts such compensatory models for career decision making. It provides a structured process to assist career counsellors in guiding clients through the systematic comparison and evaluation of their final alternatives, thereby facilitating the identification of the most suitable option at the *Choice* stage. The following section outlines the eight steps of the *Comparing and Choosing* framework and the ways in which career counsellors can support their implementation.

Comparing and Choosing

Clients seek career counselling at various stages of the decision-making process. Many individuals need support in prescreening – reducing a broad pool of career alternatives to a manageable set of promising options. Others approach the counsellor with several possibilities and need help exploring them in depth to determine which should be included in the final shortlist. For clients at the *Choice* stage, who need support in selecting the best option from their shortlist, *Comparing and Choosing* offers an appropriate framework.

This section introduces *Comparing and Choosing* and its structured, stepwise process. We demonstrate how *Comparing and Choosing* can be implemented in counselling and present *Compare & Choose*, an

open-access, evidence-based decision-support system, informed by decision theory, that implements the steps of *Comparing and Choosing* in a user-friendly format. Appendix A provides a mini-case study illustrating how the *Comparing and Choosing* framework can be incorporated into the career counselling process.

The Eight Steps of *Comparing and Choosing*

The *Choice* stage entails a systematic process of comparing and evaluating the options on the client's shortlist and assisting them in selecting the most suitable one. To undertake this process, the client should have a shortlist of 2-4 final options and a preliminary understanding of the criteria relevant for comparison. These options and attributes are then incorporated and evaluated through *Comparing and Choosing*. Across the eight structured steps of *Comparing and Choosing*, the client's attribute-based preferences, which represent their ideal career (e.g., no more than a half-hour commute), are matched with the corresponding attributes of each option. This comparison produces an overall estimate of each option's suitability, indicating how well it aligns with the client's ideal career and thus supporting the identification of the best option.

The *Comparing and Choosing* framework fosters reflection, clarifies personal goals, and highlights trade-offs, thereby helping clients make better-informed decisions. Owing to its simplicity and structured sequence, it can be readily incorporated into one or two counselling sessions. In implementing the framework, the counsellor plays a central role by guiding the client, offering suggestions, asking clarifying questions, and drawing attention to critical issues at each step.

The following section outlines the eight steps of *Comparing and Choosing*, highlighting key aspects counsellors should address with their clients to foster meaningful engagement and enhance the likelihood of informed choices. Table 1 presents the Comparison Table (available for download via this link), which supports the implementation of the eight steps; the numbers in the table correspond to the step numbers in the list that follows.

1. Listing Career Alternatives

Client's task. The client is asked to list 2-4 career alternatives on their shortlist. The alternatives are entered in the top row of the Comparison Table, under 1-Alternatives. These alternatives are typically identified prior to counselling sessions and exclude those characterized by attributes the client deems unacceptable (e.g., shift work), as such options would already have been eliminated. Thus, by the *Choice* stage, all shortlisted alternatives have been judged worthy of consideration among the finalists.

Counsellor's role. Once the career alternatives have been listed, the counsellor assesses whether the client's final shortlist is relatively homogeneous (e.g., school guidance counsellor, school psychologist, career counsellor, social worker) – generally considered more desirable (Gutentag et al., 2024) – or largely heterogeneous (e.g., chemist, business administrator, computer programmer, psychologist). If the shortlist appears arbitrary or if the client struggles to explain why certain alternatives were included, the counsellor may recommend revisiting the *Prescreening* and *In-depth exploration* stages. Counsellors may also ask whether any of the listed alternatives feel more intuitively suitable (while acknowledging that the client may respond "none"). The Discussion section addresses how the client's intuitive inclination regarding the most suitable option can be reconciled with the outcomes of the systematic comparison process.

2. Identifying and Listing Attributes

Client's task. In this step, the client identifies at least 5 attributes or criteria considered important for comparing the finalist alternatives. Examples may include teamwork, income, shift work, manual dexterity, flexible hours, work environment, and distance from home. The selected attributes should represent characteristics that differentiate the alternatives. The client's chosen attributes are entered in the left column of the Comparison Table under 2-Attributes.

Counsellor's role. The counsellor supports the client in generating a balanced and relevant set of attributes by probing with clarifying questions (e.g., "Why is this attribute important to you?") and suggesting

Table 1

The Comparison Table

			1- Alternatives					
			A		**B**		**C**	
2-Attributes	3-Optimal Level	4-Attribute Importance	5-Fit[a]	7_a-Score[b]	5-Fit[a]	7_a-Score[b]	5-Fit[a]	7_a-Score[b]
a. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
b. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
c. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
d. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
e. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
f. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
g. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
h. _____	_____	_____	___	_____	___	_____	___	_____
7^b- The overall suitability score		100		_____		_____		_____

Notes: The numbers preceding the labels in the table denote the sequence of filling out the table (e.g., begin with 1-Alternatives). The missing 6 refers to the screening of the client's responses in the table, and revising them (if needed) before proceeding to 7_a.

Fit[a] is the client's perceived estimate of the fit between their optimal level in an attribute and the level that characterizes an alternative in that attribute (0 = no fit, 1, 2, 3, 4 = perfect fit).

7_a-Score[b] is the product of Attribute importance and Fit, 7^b – is the sum of the scores in column 7_a, and represents the overall suitability of the alternatives. Step 8 involves comparing the suitability scores and circling the highest one.

additional ones the client may not have considered (e.g., opportunities for advancement, job security). For instance, if teaching is on the shortlist and the client arrived late to the first meeting, time management skills may be highlighted as relevant. Counsellors should ensure that the attributes selected meaningfully differentiate the alternatives and may encourage clients to refine broad categories (e.g., *work environment*) into more specific components (e.g., *indoor vs. outdoor work*).

Some clients may find it challenging to identify relevant attributes for comparing the finalist alternatives. In such cases, counsellors can facilitate client introspection and refer them to optional lists of commonly considered attributes (accessible through this link), which present three sets of attributes relevant to different career decision contexts (i.e., college, major or occupation, and job).

3. Describing Optimal Levels of Attributes

Client's task. The client specifies their optimal (i.e., most desirable) level for each attribute (e.g., only indoors for work environment or none for shift work). These optimal levels characterize the client's ideal alternative – their dream occupation or job. The responses are recorded in the second column from the left, adjacent to the Attributes column, under the 3-Optimal Levels heading.

Counsellor's role. Counsellors may address any incongruities or inconsistencies in the client's stated optimal levels, such as a preference for a high-paying job alongside a strong interest in working with toddlers – an unlikely combination in most occupations. In such cases, the counsellor should discuss the inconsistency with the client, highlight the low likelihood of achieving both goals within a single option, and encourage them to consider which attribute is more important or which alternative provides the best balance. Counsellors may also support the client in making the necessary, and sometimes difficult, compromises (e.g., longer-than-desirable commuting time) that can help pave the way for identifying the most suitable alternative.

4. Rating the Attributes by Importance

Client's task. Not all criteria or attributes are equally important to the client. Therefore, the client is asked to assign relative importance ratings to each attribute so that the total across all attributes sums to 100. For example, an attribute rated 20 is regarded as twice as important as one rated 10. Higher importance ratings indicate that an alternative failing to meet the client's optimal level on that attribute will be significantly less appealing, whereas lower ratings suggest that such a gap would have only a minor effect on overall appeal. These ratings often reflect either a strong desire for, or aversion to, the attribute. The client records the ratings in the third column from the left, under 4-Attribute Importance.

Counsellor's role. To facilitate the rating task, career counsellors may suggest that clients first rank-order the attributes by importance and then assign numerical ratings, ensuring that the total equals 100. Counsellors can encourage clients who find it difficult to carry out Steps 2, 3, or 4, to reflect on past experiences that varied in how satisfying they were.

5. Rating the Fit of an Attribute in Each Alternative

Client's task. Clients are asked to rate the perceived compatibility of each alternative with each attribute, proceeding row by row, attribute by attribute. Rating by attribute (row) rather than by alternative (column) reduces the likelihood of the halo effect (Wen et al., 2020). The perceived fit is reported on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (does not fit my preference for that attribute at all) to 4 (fits my optimal level for that attribute well). For example, if the optimal level is only indoors, a job that is entirely indoors would be rated 4, one that is mostly indoors 3, about equal indoors and outdoors 2, mostly outdoors 1, and only outdoors 0. The fit ratings are entered at the intersection of each alternative and attribute under the 5-Fit column.

Counsellor's role. In rare cases where an alternative receives a very low fit rating (i.e., 0 or 1) on an attribute, the counsellor should encourage the client to reflect and explain why it was included among the finalists. In some cases, the alternative may have redeeming qualities (e.g., a 4 rating) on attributes that are more critical to the client. If the low fit rating stems from a lack of feasibility (e.g., rigorous medical school admission requirements), the counsellor may suggest alternatives that share key features with the unattainable one. Alternatively, such ratings may reveal inaccurate perceptions of an occupation's attributes, in which case the counsellor can facilitate access to more reliable career information (e.g., Gourde et al., 2025). Similar interventions may also be appropriate when clients struggle to realistically assess feasibility (e.g., What is the minimum SAT score required by prestigious universities?).

6. Initial Summary Table

Client's task. Clients are encouraged to review their ratings and responses in the Comparison Table and, if they have second thoughts, revise the attribute importance or fit ratings before proceeding.

Counsellor's role. Counsellors can highlight unusual fit ratings during the review process. For example, based on the client's stated optimal level, the counsellor may note an alternative's rating that appears disproportionately high for a given attribute, informed by their professional experience and knowledge of both the client and the alternative. In such cases, the counsellor can encourage the client to gather additional information about the attribute in question and reconsider or adjust the rating in light of the new information and discussion.

7. Combining Attribute Importance and Perceived Fit

Client's task. At this step, clients are guided in aggregating the information recorded in the Comparison Table. First, the compatibility score for an alternative on a given attribute is obtained by multiplying the attribute's importance rating by its fit rating (ranging from 0 to 4). This calculation is carried out for each attribute and for all alternatives, and the resulting scores are entered in the 7a-Score columns of the Comparison Table.

Next, the overall suitability score for each alternative is determined by summing its compatibility scores across all attributes. Discrepancies on essential attributes carry greater weight and therefore reduce the alternative's overall suitability estimate. These estimates are recorded in the bottom row of the Comparison Table (b-Overall Suitability Score), under the corresponding Score column for each alternative. (The free online *Compare & Choose* decision-support system, described in the next section, automatically computes both the compatibility and overall suitability scores).

Counsellor's role. In addition to presenting and guiding the client through this step, the counsellor should ensure that the client follows the correct sequence of computations.

8. The Final Comparison Table and Its Meaning

Client's task. The client reviews the completed Comparison Table, including the total suitability score for each alternative in the bottom row. The alternative with the highest suitability score is naturally the one most closely aligned with the client's ideal option. As the maximum possible suitability score is 400 (obtained when all attributes receive the maximum fit score of 4, multiplied by importance ratings that sum to 100), the gap between 400 and an alternative's score represents the distance between the client's ideal alternative and the alternative under consideration.

Counsellor's role. When reviewing the final summary table with the alternatives' total suitability scores, counsellors can ask clients about their satisfaction with the process and its outcome. They may then draw attention to the difference between the highest and second-highest overall suitability scores. A small difference between the two may indicate high suitability for both, and the client should therefore be encouraged to gather additional information about each alternative before making a decision.

These guidelines are particularly relevant when the *Comparing and Choosing* framework is applied within counselling sessions, where clients benefit from real-time feedback. They are equally applicable in online counselling, particularly when screen sharing is possible. In both settings, counsellors act as quality-control monitors, providing comments and interpretations that enhance the effectiveness of the *Comparing and Choosing* process and support clients in the *Choice* stage.

The Online Compare & Choose Career Decision-Support System

Research has shown that decision aids, such as computer-assisted career planning systems, significantly enhance the career decision-making process (Copeland et al., 2011; Herath et al., 2024; Leung, 2022). They enable individuals to progress either with the support of their career counsellor or independently. Such tools foster more informed career decisions, particularly when combined with one-on-one counselling (Betz & Borgen, 2010; Gati et al., 2003; Leung, 2022; Whiston et al., 1998). Moreover, following the recommendations generated by these systems has been found to increase the likelihood of long-term career satisfaction (Gati et al., 2006).

In response to the need for decision-support tools at the *Choice* stage, Amit and Gati (2013) proposed developing a computerized module to help individuals systematically compare their career alternatives. This proposal led to the creation of *Compare & Choose* – a free, online decision-support module that guides users through the structured eight-step process of *Comparing and Choosing* described above. The module, accessible via this link, adheres to principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion in counselling, as well as to established guidelines for designing computer-assisted career planning systems (Gati, 1994).

The *Compare & Choose* module concludes with tailored verbal feedback, following the summary table, which highlights key insights and offers practical recommendations. When the difference in overall suitability between the top alternatives is negligible, the feedback advises treating them as equally viable and encourages gathering more information or considering secondary criteria to tip the balance.

Gati et al. (2025) analyzed the responses of 412 deliberating individuals who, on their own initiative, used the online *Compare & Choose* module to identify the most suitable occupation from their shortlist. On average, users considered 3.12 finalist alternatives and employed 6.74 attributes for comparison – a number that resembles Miller's (1956) *magical number seven* as the optimal size of a set. The mean suitability score

across alternatives and participants was 303 (SD = 42). Given that a score of 400 reflects a perfect match with the client's ideal alternative, a mean of 303 suggests that, for most users, the decision-making process involved compromises (Gati et al., 1997). These findings also provide insight into how individuals engage in deliberation when using the *Compare & Choose* module, demonstrating their ability to use the tool effectively. In the Discussion, both the *Comparing and Choosing* framework and the *Compare & Choose* decision-support module are referred to collectively as *C&C*.

Discussion

Career decisions often have long-term implications for individuals' lives, making the selection of a suitable option especially significant (Bimrose & Mulvey, 2015; Kulcsár et al., 2020). Therefore, investing in the career decision-making process can be highly beneficial, including, if available, seeking support from a career counsellor, and using *C&C*. Those who engage in systematic *Prescreening* and thorough *In-Depth Exploration* are more likely to generate suitable finalists at the *Choice* stage (Gati, 2023). At that point, using *C&C* can help identify the most suitable alternative (Gati & Asher, 2001). *C&C* can be implemented either within counselling or independently as a self-help decision-support system; its use may enhance decision-making confidence and reduce the likelihood of future regret. The following sections outline further considerations for implementing *C&C* in career counselling.

Implementing *C&C*: Considerations for Career Counselling

Who is Likely to Benefit Most from C&C?

Given the variability in individuals' decision-making styles and preferences, it is important to acknowledge that some individuals may feel less comfortable engaging with *C&C*, particularly those who prefer narrative or other qualitative approaches. Nevertheless, *C&C* may still benefit many of these individuals by reducing anxiety and resistance: it helps shift the focus from making an immediate, potentially overwhelming decision to comparing alternatives on specific attributes, thus making the process feel more structured and manageable. In addition, presenting the process as a sequence of steps with numerical estimates may frame it as a more structured task, enabling clients with personal or emotional concerns to engage with it more comfortably and effectively. This, in turn, may help some individuals progress more gradually in their career decision-making.

C&C can be effective for individuals with different vocational personalities. Within Holland's (1997) typology, Investigative and Realistic types may find its systematic structure appealing. Similarly, Harren's (1979) typology of decision-making styles suggests that rational decision-makers are likely to feel comfortable with its structured approach and reliance on quantitative inputs and outcomes. By contrast, Artistic or Social individuals may initially find the structured nature of *C&C* less appealing. However, Amit and Gati (2013) found that individuals generally perceive systematic comparisons of alternatives as more effective than holistic ones, particularly during the *Choice* stage. Interestingly, even those with an intuitive decision-making style did not favour the holistic model, suggesting that they, too, may benefit from a systematic approach.

In career counselling, the proactive involvement of the career counsellor in introducing and guiding the use of *C&C* can make it more accessible for clients who might otherwise feel overwhelmed by its analytical components. To reduce emphasis on the quantitative aspects of the process, counsellors may present it as a guided exploration of the client's preferences or as a collaborative conversation. Offering reassurance throughout the process can further help clients feel more comfortable and engaged.

Cultural differences may influence the relative effectiveness of decision-making processes. Yates and Oliveira (2016) reviewed studies linking East Asian cultures with holistic thinking. For instance, Koreans have been found to rate intuitive reasoning as more important than analytical reasoning, compared with participants from Western cultures (Buchtel & Norenzayan, 2008). Cognitive style has also been theoretically linked to social orientation, such that those who are relatively analytic tend to be individualists, while those who are relatively holistic tend to be collectivists (Varnum et al., 2010). Moreover, Japanese decision-makers

tend to favour non-compensatory schemes for addressing dilemmas, whereas Americans are inclined towards compensatory schemes (Yates & Oliveira, 2016). Nevertheless, *C&C* remains flexible in content and can accommodate diverse preferences. For example, individuals with a more dependent decision-making style (Harren, 1979) or those from collectivist cultures that value joint decision-making may benefit from using *C&C* within counselling by prompting discussions and incorporating input from family or close friends, thereby facilitating an interactive process. In this way, *C&C* can be adapted to varied decision-making styles, preferences, and cultural backgrounds. Still, it is important that counsellors adapt their feedback at each step in *C&C* to the client's specific sociocultural and ethnic background (Flores et al., 2005; Osipow & Littlejohn, 2013).

Finally, it is important to note that *C&C* is primarily a framework for comparing final alternatives, allowing individuals to input their own content and preferences. It can therefore be introduced to a wide range of clients who may differ in their concept of an ideal career, the alternatives they shortlist, and the criteria they use to compare them. These differences are reflected in the different content they enter into the Comparison Table, while following the same eight steps in the systematic comparison.

When Should C&C Be Used?

One way to evaluate where an individual is in their career decision-making process is by assessing their Range of Considered Alternatives (RCA; Gati et al., 2003), an expanded version of the Occupational Alternatives Question (Zenner & Schnuelle, 1976). The *RCA* is a self-report, multiple-choice item that asks respondents to select the statement that best describes them: (1) "I do not even have a general direction"; (2) 'I have only a general direction"; (3) "I am deliberating among a small number of specific career alternatives"; (4) "I am considering a specific alternative but want to explore other options before deciding"; (5) "I know which career alternative I am interested in, but I want to feel confident in my choice"; and (6) "I am already sure of the career I will choose." Responses of (1) or (2), which indicate a lack of consideration of specific alternatives, suggest that the individual is at or prior to the *Prescreening* stage, whereas a response of (6) indicates that a choice has already been made. Accordingly, individuals who respond with (3) to (5) can be considered suitable candidates for using *C&C* at the *Choice* stage. Hence, the *RCA* can help counsellors determine whether *C&C* is an appropriate tool to introduce, either within sessions or as a resource for independent use.

Considering Intuitions During C&C

In the absence of an objective criterion, career counselling tools like *C&C* can help examine and validate clients' intuitive inclinations by systematically evaluating and comparing alternatives (Sauter, 1999). Gati et al. (2025) elicited deliberating individuals' career intuitions about the most suitable option in their shortlist in two ways – implicit and explicit – and compared these intuitions about the most suitable alternative from their shortlist to the outcomes generated by *Compare & Choose*. In Step 1 (listing career options), the first occupation listed was considered to reflect implicit intuition. Individuals also had the option to select the occupation they felt was most suitable, reflecting their explicit intuition.

The *C&C* outcomes can either support or challenge clients' intuitive inclinations and counselors' personal opinions. When the results match intuition, the alignment serves as a form of self-endorsement, because the systematic comparison is based entirely on the client's own inputs. In such cases, comparing intuitive preferences and qualitative inclinations with *C&C* outcomes enables individuals to integrate different perspectives into their decision-making and to broaden their repertoire of career decision-making strategies. However, the best alternative identified through systematic comparison may differ from the one that is intuitively favoured. Such discrepancies may signal an internal conflict, where an alternative possesses both appealing qualities and significant shortcomings. These conflicts are a common challenge in career decision-making (Gati et al., 1996) and have been linked to lower life satisfaction (Samson et al., 2024).

When such conflicts arise, their resolution often requires counsellors to support clients in clarifying personal values and preferences and in gathering additional information through exploratory experiences (e.g., internships, short-term projects). They can also help clients recognize that, while no single alternative in the

real world of work fully satisfies all priorities, a systematic comparison of the finalist options can help identify the most suitable one.

Career counsellors may also hold personal opinions about the most suitable alternative for a client. When the counsellor's and client's intuitions align, confidence in the chosen alternative is strengthened, and if the *C&C* outcome also supports this option, confidence is reinforced further. In such cases, *C&C* can function as a quality-control mechanism (Gati & Asher, 2001). Conversely, when the counsellor's opinion and the client's inclination diverge, it may be appropriate to pause and explore the reasons for this discrepancy. Here, *C&C* and its outcome can provide valuable insights into the source of disagreement.

Future Research

C&C suggests several directions for future research that could enhance practice and benefit both clients and counsellors. Future studies should evaluate *C&C*'s effectiveness when integrated into counselling sessions and when used as a standalone self-help tool. In addition, research should explore the added value of *C&C* within counselling across diverse client groups.

Conclusions

The *PIC* model is recommended for clients facing career decisions with multiple options and many criteria. *C&C* is specifically designed to support the *Choice* stage, when individuals are comparing a few final alternatives. In this paper, we introduced both the *Comparing and Choosing* framework and the *Compare & Choose* decision-support system that implements it – both guide individuals through a systematic comparison of career options on their final shortlist. When used in counselling sessions, career counsellors can assist clients by applying the eight steps of the *Comparing and Choosing* framework, guiding them to evaluate attributes, prioritize key factors, and weigh trade-offs. At each stage, counsellors can provide feedback that not only supports clients in identifying the most suitable career option but also enhances self-awareness and enriches the overall counselling process.

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Appendix A
Helping Claire Choose Among Job Offers Using C&C

We believe that choosing among a shortlist of alternatives – for example, jobs – is one of the most common decision-making situations. To illustrate how career counsellors and guidance practitioners can apply the *C&C* framework in this context, we present the case of Claire, the client, and Adrianna, her advisor.

Claire, an economics major, received several job offers at a career fair and sought guidance. From their very first meeting, Adrianna framed Claire's dilemma as part of the *Choice* stage and reassured her that uncertainty at this point is both natural and manageable. She explained that their work together would be a collaborative process of systematically clarifying Claire's preferences and carefully weighing her options – keeping Claire's voice at the centre while drawing on Adrianna's professional guidance and facilitation.

Adrianna began by inviting Claire to list her job offers. Claire identified the following: joining the finance department in her hometown municipality, becoming an investment advisor, and working in the accounting department of a medium-sized high-tech startup. When Adrianna gently asked whether any of the options seemed intuitively most appealing, Claire hesitated briefly before responding: "For me, being an investment advisor seems the most attractive job."

Claire listed the following attributes as relevant for comparing the three jobs: prospects for professional growth, responsibility, variety of tasks, analytical work, and work-life balance. Adrianna listened attentively, then gently reminded her of the burden of her student loans. Smiling, she asked, "And income doesn't matter?" This prompted Claire to add income as her second-most-important attribute. Adrianna's probing demonstrated how the counsellor's interventions can expand clients' awareness of overlooked but crucial criteria.

Next, Adrianna guided Claire in articulating her optimal levels for each attribute, framing the exercise as an opportunity to describe her *ideal job portrait* rather than as a technical requirement. Claire replied that she is seeking high-potential professional growth and a job with significant responsibility. She would clearly prefer a job offering a high income; however, as an entry-level economist, she would be willing to consider any job with a reasonable salary – over C$80,000 with adequate fringe benefits. Given her high GPA, she aspires to use her strong analytical skills to the fullest in a job that offers a flexible work-life balance when she becomes a mother.

Adrianna introduced the weighting exercise, explaining the rationale for distributing 100 points across attributes. She observed Claire's allocations and noted a potential contradiction: both high responsibility and flexible work-life balance had been assigned identical weights, potentially masking an underlying tension. To prompt reflection, Adrianna asked: "Which would make you feel more dissatisfied – too much responsibility with an adequate work-life balance, or adequate responsibility without a flexible work-life balance?" This encouraged Claire to refine her ratings and deepened her self-understanding.

Adrianna asked Claire to estimate the fit between her ideal level on the first attribute – high prospects for professional growth – and the corresponding level in the first job, the town's finance department. Claire was reminded that fit ratings ranged from 4 (a perfect match) to 0 (an unacceptable gap). She rated the finance department job as a 2, citing limited opportunities for courses and training. Using the same procedure, she rated Jobs B and C as 4 and 3, respectively. She then assessed the fit for all attributes, rating each job's fit one attribute at a time, while Adrianna periodically checked to ensure the ratings genuinely reflected her sense of fit.

After completing the fit ratings, Adrianna asked Claire whether she was satisfied with her evaluations – both the perceived importance of the attributes and the extent to which each job aligned with her ideal characteristics. Once Claire confirmed, they calculated the overall suitability scores for the three jobs. Table 2 summarizes Claire's inputs and provides an overview of her evaluation of the three options.

Table 2 shows that Job B received the highest suitability score (330), followed closely by Job C (318). In contrast, Job A - the town's finance department, which reflected Claire's implicit intuition as her first-listed alternative—scored considerably lower (228), suggesting it could be removed from the shortlist. Claire observed that the results confirmed her initial intuition about Job B (investment advisor) and told Adrianna she now feels more confident in choosing the investment advisor job.

Table 2

Claire's Comparison Table

		The Jobs					
		A Town's finance department		**B** Investment advisor		**C** Accounting in a high-tech start-up	
Attributes	Attribute Importance	Fit[a]	Score[b]	Fit	Score	Fit	Score
Professional Growth	25	2	50	4	100	3	75
Responsibility	10	2	30	4	60	3	45
Variety of tasks	10	2	20	3	30	4	40
Using analytical skills	18	3	54	3	54	4	72
Work-life balance	15	3	30	2	20	2	20
Income	22	2	44	3	66	3	66
Job's overall Suitability score	100		228		330		318

Note: Fit[a] is Claire's perceived fit between her optimal level in an attribute and the level that characterizes a job in that attribute (4=high, 3, 2, 1, 0=no fit at all). Score[b] is the product of Attribute Importance and Fit.

As a career advisor, Adrianna also formed her own opinion. Based on her knowledge of Claire, she deliberated between Job B (investment advisor) and Job C (accounting in a high-tech start-up). While recognizing the alignment between Claire's intuition and the *C&C* results, she noted the narrow gap between the two jobs and encouraged Claire to explore both further by consulting current or former employees. She emphasized the value of complementing structured analysis with real-world insights and reassured Claire that the close scores indicated strong alignment with her aspirations, thereby reducing decision-related stress. Claire agreed to gather additional information and return for further guidance if needed.

This case illustrates how *C&C* can be used to systematically compare the finalist alternatives at the *Choice* stage, while also demonstrating the counsellor's critical role. By implementing a structured yet flexible process, Adrianna was able to support Claire in reducing uncertainty, balancing her personal opinion and Claire's intuitive inclination with systematic comparison, and enhancing her overall decision-making confidence.

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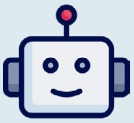

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Practitioners & Community Practices

Navigating Identity Transition from Counsellor-to-Counsellor Educator: Challenges and Opportunities

Rosina E. Mete & Cindi Saj
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Abstract

There is a lack of discussion and research on counsellor educators in Canada. With an estimated number of 228 to 304 counsellor educators across the country, examining the transition from counsellor to counsellor educator is relevant to developing a career identity and to strengthening the field. This article explores the complex transition from practicing counsellor to counsellor educator within the Canadian context, emphasizing the importance of professional identity transformation amidst evolving regulatory and accreditation landscapes. This conceptual article highlights role differences between counsellors and counsellor educators. Additionally, it provides considerations for counsellors who are interested in becoming counsellor educators. It discusses the unique challenges faced during this shift, including managing dual roles, bridging the research-practice gap and navigating role expectations. The authors highlight the distinctions between clinical practice and educational responsibilities, underscoring the need for new skills, self-reflection, and ongoing professional development. Practical strategies, such as the REP model of Reflect, Examples, Prepare and the development of a personal teaching philosophy, are proposed to support prospective counsellor educators in their preparation process. The article concludes by emphasizing the vital role of counsellor educators in shaping culturally competent, ethically grounded future practitioners and advocates for thorough self-reflection and strategic preparation to ensure successful transitions into academia.

Keywords: counsellor education Canada identity transformation regulation accreditation

The transition from practicing counsellor to counsellor educator represents a significant juncture in a professional's trajectory, demanding a multifaceted adaptation of identity, roles, and responsibilities (Dollarhide et al., 2013). This transition is laden with unique challenges and opportunities, as individuals navigate the complexities of shaping the next generation of counsellors while simultaneously maintaining their own clinical expertise and professional identity (Gibson et al., 2010). Their identity transformation is also complicated by the variety of professional terms and regulatory bodies for the counselling profession across Canada. At the time of publication, there remain provinces and territories which are unregulated. This article explores the identity transition and transformation experienced by counsellors moving into Canadian counsellor education roles. The article will focus on the existing barriers and struggles and note some of the inherent struggles and challenges during this period. The authors will provide some suggestions to guide this process and help counsellors prepare to be counsellor educators.

Canadian Counselling Regulation and Accreditation

The overview and accreditation of masters-level Canadian counsellors in mental health were established in conjunction with the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA). While the CCPA was established in 1965, the standards of accrediting counsellor education programs in Canada were developed in 2002. It is estimated that in Canada, the need for mental health counsellors will continue to increase (Government of Canada, 2023). Consequently, educational programs in counselling and psychology will continue to remain popular. With this demand, it is likely that counsellors at different stages of their careers may pursue positions as instructors in graduate counsellor education.

The Regulation of the Profession

While psychologists and social workers have a long history within Canada starting in the early 1900s, the regulation of masters-level counsellors in Canada is still relatively recent (Connors, 2013; Hogarth &

Ashcroft, 2013). The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) provides standards and a code of ethics for counsellors to follow across the country. They will also assess applicants to become Canadian Certified Counsellors (CCC) or Canadian Certified Counsellor Supervisors (CCC-S). The first designation is a certification process for Masters or Doctoral level graduates in counselling who completed a clinical supervised practicum component, have two references, and have a vulnerable sector police records check (CCPA, 2024a).

Consequently, across Canada, masters-level counsellors may become Canadian Certified Counsellors and follow the CCPA's Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics. However, this is a voluntary process provided by a professional association. Their mandate includes the promotion of the counselling profession across Canada.

The regulation of counselling in Canada first began with the Nova Scotia College of Counselling Therapists (NSCCT) in 2011 (NSCCT, 2024). Additional provinces like Ontario and New Brunswick followed with their own provincial regulatory body. In Canada, the act of counselling or psychotherapy is protected under relevant provincial Health Acts legislation and accordingly, a regulatory body is created to allow for regulation of the profession. Compared to a professional association, a regulatory body, such as the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, "regulates its registrants in the interest of protecting the public" (College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO), 2024). An individual in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, or Prince Edward Island who practices mental health counselling will require registration with their regulatory college of counselling therapists. In Ontario or Quebec, an individual who practices mental health counselling will refer to it as psychotherapy and register with their regulatory college of registered psychotherapists. In the rest of the provinces and all three territories, mental health counselling or psychotherapy is not yet regulated and interested parties can become Canadian Certified Counsellors (CCPA, 2024b). For the purposes of this article, both terms psychotherapists and counsellors are used interchangeably.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHI), it is estimated that there are 654,780 mental health and substance use providers across Canada. Providers are defined as "social workers, family physicians, occupational therapists, nurse practitioners, registered nurses" as well as counselling therapists and psychotherapists (CIHI, 2021). The majority of providers are in Ontario with 237,392 providers (Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHI), 2021).

Table 1 provides estimates of the number of counsellors per province/territory based on the most recent statistics from the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapists Association Annual General Report, which is freely available online (CCPA, 2024c). These numbers reflect the number of members who are registered as Canadian Certified Counsellors in 2023 and 2024. Some provinces and territories were reported together. The table also includes number of registered psychotherapists (Ontario, Quebec) and counselling therapists (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec, Prince Edward Island) as applicable based on their regulatory college numbers (College of Counselling Therapy Prince Edward Island (CCT-PEI, 2025; CRPO, 2024; Government of Canada, 2024b; Government of Canada, 2024c; NSCCT, 2025).

It is challenging to determine the number of counsellor educators within Canada as there are no specific statistics on this position. At time of publication, the CCPA listed 38 universities on their website that offer masters-level counselling programs across Canada. If the authors and readers were to estimate an average of 6 to 8 full-time/permanent professors per school, that would mean there are 228 to 304 counsellor educators across the country. This number may be higher if numbers regarding adjunct or sessional professors were included.

Counsellor Education Programs and Accreditation in Canada

In Canada, individuals may take graduate-level (Masters or PhD) programs in counselling or counselling psychology programs to become counsellors or psychotherapists in their province or territory. To become an educator in a graduate program, generally instructors and faculty will have a doctoral-level degree related to counselling or psychology.

The CCPA developed accreditation standards for masters-level counselling programs in Canada in 2002. As per the CCPA, the "Council for Accreditation of Counsellor Education Programs (CACEP), referred to as the Council on Accreditation, is to oversee and manage the CCPA accreditation program, which involves

Table 1

Estimated Distribution of Counsellors and Psychotherapists Across Canada

Province/Territory	Canadian Certified Counsellors 2023	Canadian Certified Counsellors 2024	Registered Members of Regulatory College
Alberta/Northwest Territories	971	1221	NA
British Columbia* and Yukon	1321	1486	NA – Yukon 10,000* BC
Manitoba and Nunavut	331	391	NA
New Brunswick	378	420	850
Newfoundland and Labrador	245	271	NA
Nova Scotia	415	422	187
Ontario	1032	1132	14,000
Prince Edward Island	45	51	149
Quebec	130	180	9,050
Saskatchewan	143	190	NA

Note: *British Columbia also has its own professional association, the British Columbia Association for Clinical Counsellors (BCACC) and reports 10,000 members – 90% of which are Registered Clinical Counsellors (BCACC, 2025).

providing professional and arm's-length evaluation of master's level counselling programs in Canada" (CCPA, 2022, p.4). CACEP accreditation allows program graduates to become CCCs without an assessment of the program or curriculum and helps to streamline applications. There are 12 core content areas that each program must include which are:

1. Counselling as a profession;
2. Ethical and legal issues in counselling;
3. Professional counselling, collaboration, and consultation;
4. Group counselling;
5. Human development and learning;
6. Diversity and social justice;
7. Responding to the TRC's Calls to Action;
8. Career and lifespan development;
9. Assessment processes;
Research methods;
11. Program evaluation; and
12. Reflective practice (CCPA, 2022, p.13).

CACEP also requires that programs integrate these standards with a culturally responsible lens and acknowledge the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action for Education in Canada. In Canada, the TRC provided a national strategy with recommendations to rebuild Canada's relationships with Indigenous Peoples (Government of Canada, 2024a). This commitment aligns with the critical knowledge and understanding required by counsellor educators to support their clients.

While these accreditation standards highlight core competencies in counselling, many counselling programs are now focused on regulatory bodies' approval of their programs, such as the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO). There are currently four universities offering a total of six programs accredited by CACEP.

The CCPA and CACEP standards are still important, as many counselling students will become registered as CCCs. As seen in Table 1, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Saskatchewan provinces and Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Yukon territories do not have regulatory bodies at time of publication. Alberta is currently in the process of finalizing their regulatory college for counselling therapists.

Difference between a Counsellor and a Counsellor Educator: Practice, Supervision and Teaching

Counsellor Role

The primary focus of a counsellor or psychotherapist is to facilitate positive change and personal growth with their clients (Gonzalez & McKinney, 2022). This is achieved by establishing an ethical and safe therapeutic relationship, with the goal of providing emotional support, therapeutic interventions, and practical skills to help clients navigate their challenges and enhance their overall well-being.

An effective counsellor should possess skills to create and build a rapport or therapeutic alliance, should be competent in attuning with their clients and use a variety of active listening skills such as reflection of content and feelings, paraphrasing, summarizing and managing the session (Gelso & Carr, 2022). A counsellor must possess self-awareness and be mindful of their own values, ethics, social location and intersectionality (Williams & J'Briel, 2025). The awareness of one's own beliefs, biases, privileges, and oppression is essential when working in the helping profession to recognize one's countertransference and mindfully explore one's blind spots. Self-awareness is also crucial to being conscious, respectful, appropriate, and aware of clients' social locations while practicing with cultural humility, sensitivity, and ethics (Hook et al., 2013).

Typically, a counsellor holds a master's degree in counselling or counselling psychology. In addition, a counsellor must also maintain a solid theoretical foundation and awareness of their theoretical practice approach and its benefits and limitations, how they develop a therapeutic rapport and follow the structure of a case management plan and be transparent with the goals in their helping role. They must identify their beliefs regarding a helping relationship, and act in accordance with the evidence-based research to support their practice approach. There must be a solid foundation in theoretical orientations to best support their clients, and a competent counsellor must know how their professional and personal self connect to their practice approach.

Subsequently, a counsellor should have a keen awareness of their internal locus of control and a clear understanding of why they have chosen this career path. This involves reflecting on the underlying motivations for pursuing a profession in counselling, whether the primary aim is financial gain, a genuine desire to assist others in achieving wellness and improving their quality of life, or a combination of both. Recognizing these motivations is crucial, as it enables the practitioner to remain authentic and focused on their practice, ensuring that their professional journey aligns with their values and clients' needs. Moreover, this self-awareness can enhance their effectiveness in providing support and guidance, ultimately benefitting both the practitioner and those they serve. When a person enters the counselling profession, self-reflection and self-awareness are very important skills.

Counselling Educator Role

A counsellor educator plays a crucial role in training and preparing future counsellors (Okech & Rubel, 2018). The primary focus of a counsellor educator is on academic learning and skill development. A counsellor educator must often possess a higher education level, such as a PhD in Counselling, Psychology, or a related discipline. It is assumed that this advanced education and training prepares them not only to practice in the field; but also, to supervise other clinicians, to develop educational programs, to teach others, and to contribute to the body of knowledge in the counselling field.

A counsellor educator must possess the knowledge and practice experience of a counsellor, while also having additional skills. Some of the essential skills that a counsellor educator should have include clinical experience, strong interpersonal skills, effective teaching abilities, and a dedication to continuous professional development through ongoing education and training. There must also be a solid understanding and commitment to ethical principles. The ability to model ethical behaviour is important in preparing students for their roles as counsellors. A counsellor educator must have a solid professional identity which would prepare them for the role of counsellor educator (Calley & Hawley, 2008). However, the transition from counsellor to counsellor educator may involve re-examining one's identity as a clinician and applying it to an educational

milieu. This article provides more information on the differences between a counsellor and a counsellor educator as well as the challenges they face.

In addition, understanding the reasons behind someone's decision to become a counsellor educator is essential. Being aware of one's social location, intersectionality, oppression, and privilege is also important, as being aware of one's values, biases and opinions to uphold professionalism and ethical practice is crucial (Ratts et al., 2016).

Role Differences

The roles of counselling and teaching share some similarities, particularly when it comes to working with students and clients, but they also have some distinct differences (Haddock & Whitman, 2018; Hall et al., 2021). For example, counsellors are primarily focused on providing direct client care, whereas counsellor educators focus on training and preparing future counsellors through courses, assignments, experiential learning opportunities, and structured educational programs. While counsellors are working with their clients towards goals and positive change, counsellor educators are focused on the assessment of progress around theoretical orientation, practice skills and academic research and their findings. Counsellor educators are also tasked with having additional insights into the role of counsellor education and supervision, which is crucial for understanding the transition process from student to counsellor (Okech & Rubel, 2018).

While counsellors typically receive foundational training in culturally sensitive approaches during their education, counsellor educators must further expand their knowledge, skills, and abilities to address complex and specific issues such as cultural diversity, Indigenous worldviews, and multilingualism within their teaching. Given Canada's multicultural landscape, counsellor education programs should place a strong emphasis on culturally responsive counselling practices. This involves training future counsellors to engage meaningfully with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, understanding the role of culture in mental health, and tailoring interventions to meet the unique needs of various communities. To deepen their understanding and enhance their teaching, counsellor educators can engage in ongoing professional development through training, workshops, and collaboration with colleagues. Many Canadian universities are also actively pursuing decolonization within education, in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, to ensure that respectful, accurate, and historically informed perspectives regarding Indigenous peoples are embedded within the educational milieu. For example, there are some Canadian universities that collaborate with Indigenous Knowledge Holders to co-develop curricula and facilitate training in a way that is respectful, reciprocal, relevant, and responsible, which reflects the "Two-Eyed Seeing" approach (Ansloos et al., 2022).

Amongst some of the main differences between a counsellor and counsellor educator is the primary focus and responsibilities, as well as their larger impact on the profession (Gibson et al., 2010). While counsellors work one-on-one with clients and use ethical practice within the therapeutic alliance and support their clients towards change, a counsellor educator is creating future counsellors. Counsellor educators are tasked with equipping future counsellors with the knowledge and skills essential for effective practice (Kottler & Shepard, 2019). Counsellor educators are also responsible for staying up-to-date on research and providing this information to others in order to also learn relevant theory and practice. In addition, counsellor educators are expected to educate others on what is appropriate and ethical clinical practice by modelling, with examples and with accompanying literature. The transition from counsellor to counsellor educator involves reviewing one's current clinical and professional identity and integrating an educational lens and approach.

Challenges in Transitioning from Counsellor to Counsellor Educator: Navigating Skills, Roles, and Evidence-Based Research

Transitioning from a practicing counsellor to a counsellor educator presents a multitude of challenges, primarily centered around navigating dual identities, bridging the gap between research and practice, and managing role expectations. Counsellor educators must shift their mindset from clinical practice and related skills to focus on developing new skill sets to effectively teach and mentor future counsellors. Additionally, they

face the complex task of translating their theoretical orientation, practice experience and research findings into practical applications for students, often requiring significant self-reflection, awareness, time and expertise. Role boundaries and ethical considerations further complicate this transition, as educators strive to serve as role models without overstepping professional limits, a balance that can be disrupted by issues such as burnout. Social class and cultural background also influence the experience of becoming a counsellor educator, impacting confidence and perceived legitimacy within academic environments. Overall, this transition demands not only confidence in current skills, the humility to acquire new skills but also the ability to tie it all together to support and integrate the evolving roles and expectations inherent in counsellor education.

Challenges in Transition

One of the primary challenges faced by counsellors transitioning into educator roles is the negotiation of dual identities (Ong et al., 2019). This involves balancing the roles of practitioner and educator, which may require a significant shift in mindset and skillset (Owens & Neale-McFall, 2014). Counsellor educators must not only possess clinical expertise; but also, demonstrate proficiency in teaching, curriculum development, as well as student mentorship. The ability to effectively convey complex theoretical concepts, facilitate experiential learning activities, and provide constructive feedback to students requires a different set of skills than those used in direct clinical practice. This can be particularly challenging for counsellor educators who continue to maintain a private practice, as they must effectively manage their time and energy while ensuring that both their clinical and teaching responsibilities are met (Morrissette & Gadbois, 2006).

Addressing the Research-Practice Gap

Another significant challenge for counsellor educators is bridging the research-practice gap. Clinical training and education are of central importance to both the specialty of counsellor education and the profession of counselling (Sexton, 2000). While research plays a crucial role in informing evidence-based practice, many counsellors find it difficult to translate research findings into practical applications. Counsellor educators must be able to critically evaluate research, synthesize findings from multiple studies, and communicate this information in a way that is accessible and relevant to students. Furthermore, counsellor educators are increasingly expected to conduct their own research and contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. This requires a significant investment of time and resources, as well as a strong understanding of research methodologies and data analysis techniques (Sexton, 2000).

Negotiating Role Boundaries and Expectations

Counsellor educators often face the challenge of negotiating role boundaries and expectations with students, colleagues, and the wider academic community. They are responsible for remaining sensitive to fundamental ethical issues, varied student needs, and academic/professional standards (Morrissette & Gadbois, 2006). “Students may seek concrete answers and techniques for mastering basic counselling skills, particularly in the early stages of their development” (Levitt & Jacques, 2005, p. 46). For example, explaining how to respond empathetically is one example noted by Levitt and Jacques (2005) that includes ambiguity for students. There is no one concrete way to demonstrate empathy as a counsellor. Consequently, Levitt and Jacques (2005) recommend demonstrating different models of core counselling skills for students to learn about the variety of forms empathy and other skills may take. Counsellor educators are expected to serve as role models for ethical and professional conduct, as well as mentors who can guide students in their professional development. However, they must also maintain appropriate boundaries and avoid becoming overly involved in students’ personal lives. This can be particularly challenging when working with students who are struggling with personal issues or who are experiencing difficulties in their clinical work. Burnout among counsellor educators not only affects the quality of counsellor training but also impacts the clients served by counsellors-in-training (Sangganjanavanich & Balkin, 2013).

Within the literature, there is a qualitative study in New Zealand that examined the experience of counsellors who were hired as counsellor educators with one-year contracts at a university (Crocket & Kotzé, 2012). The participants noted connections between theory and practice as well as integrating real-life examples in the classroom contributed to greater success as an instructor. However, the participants noted that mentorship for counsellor educators and fostering an environment of collegiality would assist in enhancing their teaching experiences (Crocket & Kotzé, 2012).

Another component that contributes to the challenges in obtaining counsellor educator roles is social class. Nelson et al. (2006) conducted a qualitative study examining the experience of counsellor educators from lower and lower-middle-class backgrounds and their journey in academia. Traditionally, academia is seen as a concept achieved by those with resources (for example; social, financial) and transitioning to an academic environment can be daunting. Becoming a counsellor educator or an academic in the 'ivory tower' can impact an individual. According to Nelson et al. (2006),

> upward mobility seems to involve alterations in identity and related stressors as well as loss of connection to one's original culture, loss of a sense of home, and other losses, such as no longer being simpatico with family members and old friends (p.3).

After obtaining their PhD, clinical experience, and working as a counsellor educator, participants still reported questioning their abilities within the classroom and as a professor. The researchers noted that communication and discussions regarding social class can break the stigma as well as mentoring and training programs for early career educators.

Preparing for the Transition: From Counsellor to Counsellor Educator

The journey from being a counsellor to becoming a counsellor educator represents a significant transformation in professional identity. This transition necessitates the development of new skills as well as a profound redefinition of one's role within the field from front line work to educator. Individuals must learn to integrate various responsibilities such as teaching, supervision, research, and service into their existing professional identity. This complex transition demands ongoing learning and adaptability as they shift from direct client care to mentoring future practitioners, engaging in ongoing evidence-based learning, and actively serving the profession on a practice and ethical basis. Ultimately, this progression and evolution enhances the capacity to shape the next generation of counsellors while maintaining clinical proficiency.

Counsellors-in-training use an integrative identity formation process that involves conceptual and experiential learning experiences to identify, clarify, and reclarify their identities and theoretical orientation as counsellors (Auxier et al., 2003). This process is often characterized by a reflection and re-evaluation of personal values, beliefs, and professional goals, plus the development of new skills and competencies (Dong et al., 2018). The need to continually reinvent therapeutic practice highlights the need for counsellor identity to stay up-to-date about current thinking in mental health and counselling research and studies in education (Barraclough, 2024). This transition can be particularly challenging for counsellors who have spent years developing a strong sense of theory to practice and with a particular identity as a practitioner, as they must now reconcile this identity with the demands of their new role as educators. The development of professional identity is an ongoing process that is influenced by a variety of factors, including personal experiences, training, and supervision (Moss et al., 2014).

Considerations for Counsellors to become Counsellor Educators

The transition from counsellor to counsellor educator is a multifaceted journey that signifies both professional development and confidence, and in turn an identity transformation. The transition involves moving beyond direct client care while keeping that mind frame in order to teach and guide others within the field. This evolution is not merely about having the skills to be a counsellor; but also, the tools to communicate, hold space, be professional, and integrate theory and practice approaches. The transition requires practicing

counsellors to reconfigure their sense of self within the field and integrate clinical expertise with pedagogical responsibilities.

Research on the transition from experienced clinical counselling practitioners to counsellor educators highlights several challenges related to preparation, including the interview process. Many doctoral graduates report feeling unprepared for this transition (Reybold, 2003; Sun & Simon-Roberts, 2020). Specifically, they often struggle to step back and develop experiential learning scenarios which effectively demonstrate their skills and theoretical knowledge. This phenomenon persists despite doctoral graduates expressing confidence in their ability to integrate theory with practical client work. The underlying challenge appears to be the extent to which their practice can be effectively taught, as well as their difficulty in articulating and demonstrating their practical skills within an educational context. Consequently, they find it hard to provide relevant examples that showcase their knowledge and abilities (Niles et al., 2001).

Integration Success: Reflect, Examples, Prepare

Due to the available research and outlined challenges regarding the identity transition process for counsellors becoming counsellor educators, the authors have developed two evidence-based approaches to succeed in preparing to become a counsellor educator, specifically an acronym and a case example with structured reflective questions. The authors of this article are established clinicians and counsellor educators in Canada and have reviewed the literature and available evidence as well as reflected on their own individual experiences as a counsellor educator and mentors in academia. The authors created an evidence-based model which is a guided process using an acronym with reflective questions. The first component of the acronym allows the counsellor to reflect on their values and experiences whereas the remainder of the acronym assists in preparing the counsellor educator to describe their skills and relevant abilities. Firstly, the following approaches may assist in ensuring skill recognition and integration from practice to theory and skill. The acronym, REP, which stands for Reflect, Examples, and Prepare is outlined in Table 2. The acronym also features recommendations for future interviews which would be the last step before obtaining a counsellor educator position in Canada. To assist with obtaining a counsellor educator position, the article authors

Table 2

Strategies for Self-Reflection and Integration of Skills: Reflect, Examples, Prepare (REP)

Reflect	
Your Identity as a Counsellor as it relates to Counsellor Education	• Why do you want to be a counsellor educator? • What were some of the experiences that shaped your graduate counselling experience? • What are your top three values as a counsellor? How do they apply to an educational setting? • For example: I value communication. As a counsellor educator, I will ensure I maintain clear and professional communication with my students both verbally and electronically.
What are the values/ vision/motto of the graduate program or department?	• What drew you to the counsellor educator position? • Why are the values/vision/motto of the graduate program or department important to you?
When you think of yourself as a Counsellor, what are your top three strengths?	• How can you implement them within an educational setting? For example: My attention to detail means I will review student assignments in depth and ensure I provide relevant and timely feedback.

Examples:	
What are some examples of your successes as a counsellor?	• How can you apply those examples in a counselling education setting? For example: Working with a colleague that you disagree with could translate to de-escalating a situation with a student.
How do you integrate cultural responsibility and sensitivity in your counselling?	• Consider how it may be integrated within an educational setting such as allowing for space, being respectful, and ensuring you continue to learn about other cultures. Recognizing if you come from a place of privilege is also important to both clients and students.
Prepare	
Where will the interview take place? Online or in-person?	**If Online:** • Test your technology. Download the video conference program such as Zoom, Skype or Teams and ensure you can log in successfully before the interview. Do a test run where you videotape yourself speaking. Review and adjust as necessary. • Do you wear glasses? Adjust the level of brightness on the screen. • Are you in a noisy place? Can you work from an office? Or use a white noise machine or bring up white noise on YouTube via your phone? • Do you live with your partner, family, children, or pets? Ensure that they know when your interview is. Have a babysitter for your children, if applicable. Put your pets in another room or have them spend time with a friend during the interview. • Consider what you are wearing. In the post-pandemic age, generally people may dress more casually but the authors recommend professional attire while on screen. Ensure your clothes are ironed. Do not wear band or graphic t-shirts – unless it is a graphic t-shirt that encapsulates your values and you can highlight it in the interview. An example could be a t-shirt from a conference you attended with a blazer or cardigan. • Jewellery or make-up may be worn, but it is not necessary. The authors recommend that you do not make it the focal point unless it is something you are used to. For example, if you never wear eye shadow and put some on before the interview, it may become a distraction when you rub your eyes. • Arrive 5-10 minutes early. **In-person:** • Consider your attire and ensure you are wearing a professional outfit. • Avoid using any perfumes or scented soaps as most educational environments are scent-free. • Bring a copy of your CV/Resume to refer to. • Double-check where the interview is located and verify you know where to park and where to meet. • Arrive 10 minutes early.

developed a case example that applies to interview preparation as well as teaching considerations. There are also structured questions to assist in developing one's teaching philosophy through experience and reflection.
Example Question:

The authors also encourage potential counsellor educators to consider questions related to the bridge between theory and practice. One such example may be related to ethics. Consider the following question: How do you address ethical dilemmas in counselling? How would you teach this to others?

Another example involves redefining one's professional role within the context of dual identities and varied environments that influence practice. For instance, engaging in self-reflection through guided questions that consider multiple factors, populations, and settings is essential. An example would be asking oneself: if you encountered an ethical situation with a client, how would you handle it? Then, compare that to how you would address an ethical dilemma involving a student.

Your response may include one or more of the following ideas:

- Consult with a peer.
- Consult your clinical supervisor.
- Review the CCPA Code of Ethics.
- Review your regulatory college guidelines.

However, in an educational setting that may look like:

- Consulting with a colleague.
- Consulting your supervisor.
- Reviewing the standards and guidelines in the Academic Calendar or relevant policies for faculty and students.

The next approach may assist with both interview preparation and success in teaching. The authors encourage those wanting to become counsellor educators to consider their teaching philosophy. A teaching philosophy summarizes your values, goals, and beliefs regarding teaching and learning. The first step is to consider the learning process. In order to determine one's teaching philosophy require self-reflection, self awareness and the ability to introspect on the belief around how learning take place. What are the beliefs regarding how people learn concepts? The second step is to then conceptualize teaching. As a counsellor educator, what are the beliefs about how would teaching and learning take place? Self-reflection around the assumptions about learning are important to keep in mind as someone chooses to transition from a counsellor to a counsellor educator because it will show up in how they approach teaching. Other questions to consider that were adapted from the Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation – University of Toronto (n.d.) are:

- When reflecting on teaching and education, what assumptions come up for me?
- Why do I teach in a certain manner?
- How do I motivate, challenge, or support students?
- If you are feeling overwhelmed, consider your counselling philosophy. What is your counselling philosophy? Or your approach to counselling? How can you modify that or conceptualize it to frame your teaching philosophy? For example, you may state that, "I believe in client-centered care and supporting my clients."

Some considerations for a counsellor educator teaching philosophy are to be aligned to create a positive and engaging learning environment that fosters student participation and enthusiasm. Such a learning environment can be established by utilizing a variety of teaching methods, such as active learning techniques, direct instruction, and case studies, to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs. Additionally, connecting learning to real-world applications helps students acknowledge the relevance of their education, enhancing their motivation and understanding of the subject matter.

For future and current counsellor educators, further recommendations based on the literature include fostering collegial relationships within the workplace to gain better understanding of the role and workplace expectations at the university. Additionally, expanding one's research comprehension and activities, for example, by partnering with non-profit organizations to engage in research, or conducting research with academic peers, can be beneficial for those who would like to enhance their identity as a counsellor educator and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transitioning from a practicing counsellor to a counsellor educator is a professional practice approach that involves transitioning from working with clients to working with students. It involves a significant professional and identity transformation grounded in self-reflection and practice awareness. The shift from counsellor to counsellor educator requires not only the development of new pedagogical and mentorship skills; but also, a different practice reflection and approach. Challenges such as managing dual identities, bridging the research-practice gap, and navigating role expectations are common and often discourage many from possessing the confidence needed to enter the counsellor educator field. However, there are many considerations that can assist in making the transition possible and successful. Effective preparation, including self-reflection, understanding of teaching philosophies, and ongoing professional development, are essential for a successful transition. As the counselling profession in Canada continues to evolve, particularly with the ongoing development of regulation and accreditation standards, counsellor educators play a crucial role in shaping future practitioners who are culturally competent, ethically grounded, and responsive to the diverse needs of Canadian society. Before stepping into teaching roles, the article advocates for the practice of self-reflection and thorough preparation for interviews to help ensure a successful career. To aid in this process, it introduces the acronym REP, Reflect, Examples, Prepare, serving as a memorable guideline for aspiring counsellor educators to utilize as they prepare for their identity transition.

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Exploring Non-University Doctoral Alternatives for Scholar-Practitioners: An Autoethnographic Account

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Abstract

This paper explores non-university doctoral qualifications as an alternative doctoral pathway for scholar practitioners and industry professionals transitioning into academia. Through an autoethnographic approach, the author reflects on their personal journey pursuing a UK-based Level 8 diploma, providing an insider perspective on motivations, barriers, and perceptions encountered. The study reveals limited awareness and academic bias against these qualifications, despite their flexible, practice-oriented design that aligns well with the needs of mid-career professionals. Findings highlight the potential of non-university doctoral qualifications to support professional development, also identifying the need for greater standardisation to improve their legitimacy and comparability with traditional doctorates such as the PhD and DBA. This work contributes original insight into a rarely examined doctoral route, broadening discussions around professional doctorates and advocating for inclusive academic recognition of industry-informed expertise. By linking lived experience with broader educational structures, the study challenges dominant credential norms and calls for cultural shifts in academic perception.

Keywords: Autoethnography, professional identity, professional doctorate, work-based learning, research culture, academic perception.

The traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) has long been considered the pinnacle of academic achievement by the Higher Education (HE) community (Mattijssen et al., 2020). However, there is a growing demand for alternative, more flexible options, due to the increasing number of mid-career professionals, labelled "nontraditional doctoral students," or NDSs for short (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024), seeking doctoral-level study. For them, balancing work, home life, and academic commitments can make the traditional PhD less feasible, and alternatives may offer similar benefits without the constraints of the traditional route (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Non-traditional routes are a topic considered in the works of Coughlin (2024), Horta and Chan (2023), and Servage (2009) to name but a few. However, existing research tends to focus upon other routes typically available within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), notably online doctoral programmes, ODPs for short (Dunlap, 2024; Lee et al., 2022) such as the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). The aim of this paper is to explore an alternative seldom discussed: practice-based qualifications. In the United States and Canada, doctoral-level study is university based, however, in the author's native United Kingdom, non-university doctoral qualifications are also recognised - by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), a non-ministerial government body, at Level 8 in their Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) (GOV.UK, 2024). Ofqual Level 8 qualifications broadly align with doctoral-level descriptors in the Canadian Qualifications Framework, which recognizes PhDs as Level 10. Herein, these will be referred to as "non-university doctoral qualifications" (NUDQs).

This exploration is particularly pertinent to "pracademics" – mid-career industry professionals who opt to transition from industry to academia - since achieving doctor status can unlock career progression in the academic setting (Blackler & Miller, 2021; Owens, 2017). Subsequently, this paper utilises the methodology of autoethnography to explore the personal experience of the author, as a pracademic, in their undertaking of a NUDQ as a lesser-known alternative doctoral pathway. Autoethnography, a method that connects personal experience to broader cultural contexts, allows for a reflexive examination of the motivations behind pursuing a NUDQ, the barriers encountered, and the perceptions within academia regarding such achievements (Adams & Manning, 2015; Chang, 2016). Ultimately, the objective is to challenge traditional boundaries of academic recognition (Blackler & Miller, 2021; Owens, 2017).

In positioning this work, it is important to acknowledge the broader educational landscape marked by the modernisation and commodification of higher education (Ball, 2012; Brown et al., 2011). These transformations influence how qualifications are structured, perceived, and valued within knowledge economies. The concept of "credentialism" (Collins, 1979) further explains how academic qualifications become proxies for competence and employability. Such frames provide critical context for exploring NUDQs as not just educational pathways but market-embedded credentials subject to contestation. In summary, this paper seeks to address the following research question: *How do non-university doctoral qualifications support scholar practitioner professional development, and how are they perceived within the context of higher education's credential culture?* This question informs the autoethnographic exploration, providing a critical lens through which personal experience intersects with broader sociocultural and institutional forces.

Literature Review

Identity and Barriers

In business as a discipline in particular, there is a growing demand for alternative, flexible options to the traditional PhD, (i.e., ODPs), to address a shortfall of doctorate holders (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). Due to the emergence of ODPs, the unique characteristics of online doctoral students (ODSs) and their experiences have been of interest to researchers, although the focus of such studies tends to be the exploration of pedagogic strategies and processes to better support this group (Lee et al., 2022), as opposed to personal experiences.

Exploring ODS characteristics, it is noted that they may sometimes be referred to as "nontraditional doctoral students," or NDSs (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). ODSs are typically mid-career adult learners (Williams et al., 2019) who seek a practical pathway to achieving the goal of a doctorate (Dunlap, 2024). They are usually indirect pathway students because they have not transitioned immediately from master's degrees and can be categorised as interrupters (those with less than a 5-year gap since last study), or returners; those with more than a 5-year gap since last study (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). In both cases, they are often reported to be under-prepared, under-resourced, or time- and resource-pressured for the study they are about to engage in (Berg, 2016). This may be due to their work and family obligations (Williams et al., 2021), such as having a full-time job, being married, and having children (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). Forty-one percent take more than the recommended 5 years to complete their programme (Watson et al., 2024), likely as a result of their home circumstances, but also due to other factors outside of their control. Lee et al. (2022) and Williams et al. (2021) note the layer of complexity due to the technology-mediated nature of ODPs, and the reliance on online interactions due to ODSs being at a distance from their institution and faculty supervisor - all potential challenges for an ODS.

Motivation

Horta (2018) points out that the main motivation for most traditional students to enrol upon and study a doctoral programme is to go on to work in academia, either as a lecturer or researcher. This is a stark difference from the motivations of nontraditional students, who are fuelled in the pursuit of the doctorate pathway for one or more of three reasons: the quest for self, the intellectual quest, or the professional quest (Skakni, 2018). Underpinning this is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT), as the aforementioned "quests" can be linked to the three innate psychological needs of autonomy (the quest for self), competence (the intellectual quest), and relatedness (the professional quest). Where nontraditional students are concerned, the debate of intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation also emerges. They may be intrinsically motivated by an interest in practice-oriented research, science, and the dissemination of knowledge; or extrinsically motivated by social benefits (networking), and the furthering of their career in industry (Terentev et al., 2020).

Current literature also highlights ways to analyse *ongoing* motivation throughout their programme. Litalien et al. (2015) refers to the conceptual lens of the self-determination continuum (Litalien et al., 2015) to do so. A model developed by Ryan & Deci (2000), the continuum consists of intrinsic regulation, integration regulation, identified regulation, introjection, and external regulation. This highlights how underpinning

motivations may change and develop throughout. Similarly, social cognitive theory (SCT) may provide understanding as to how students manage motivation-triggered behaviours, such as control and reinforcement, as they move towards their goal (Nwosu et al., 2022). In the case of ODSs, SCT considers expectancy and observational factors specific to the group which may positively or negatively impact drive (Jacobs et al., 2012).

Perceptions

A PhD is widely considered to be the highest level of education despite the existence of other qualifications at the same level (Mattijssen et al., 2020), and a pervasive PhD bias across academia remains (Dunlap, 2024). An example of this is Servage (2009: p774), who noted that some people may be "*content with a professional doctorate that is not a serious status contender in academic circles*." Unfortunately, the bias extends beyond academia, with Suomi et al. (2020) finding some professional doctorate holders do not feel their degree is respected outside of universities, with inconsistency of attitudes amongst employers. In some cases, respondents in that study reported bullying and derogatory comments from industry colleagues regarding their doctorate, hence avoiding sharing their achievements where possible.

It is worth noting, however, that poor perceptions of PhDs exist too, particularly the myth that holders are trained only to perform research and serve in HEIs (Germain-Alamartine et al., 2021). Kopotev et al. (2021) note these are rarely read by more than a few people. Hambrick (1997) points out that no value is obtained from this squabble over differences and, instead, there is a need for a shift in business school culture to shape better attitudes towards all types of doctoral study (Khuram, 2024). Winn et al. (2008) refer to a need for reputation management amongst doctorate holders at a collective level, as by doing so, members of that collective can come together to ensure consistency in their messages and actions, with a view to altering judgements surrounding their reputation and the reputation of their respective qualifications.

Impact

Saturation has triggered a "PhD crisis," whereby graduates cannot always access meaningful employment *within* academia (Coughlin, 2024; Horta & Chan, 2023). This has pushed graduates into non-academic roles such as government, non-profits, startups, and the financial sector in particular, meaning they positively impact industry (Coughlin, 2024; Li & Horta, 2023; Li & Horta, 2022). However, traditional PhDs are designed primarily (albeit not exclusively) to prepare the candidate to become a principal investigator, and although this skillset is valued in industry, the PhD experience often fails to prepare the candidate for the wider responsibilities of a non-academic career (Coughlin, 2024). The impact of non-traditional doctorates, on the other hand, is vastly different. Such qualifications aim to impart knowledge and skills applicable to industry context (Watson et al., 2024), particularly co-development and networking (Macintosh et al., 2021). Generally, such qualifications achieve this - with 60% of non-traditional doctoral completers feeling their qualification is valued by employers (Watson et al., 2024), albeit with room for improvement, since 11% feel their doctorate is not valued, and 26% remain unsure.

Current literature surrounding the impact of non-traditional doctorates remains focused upon research outputs, despite their practical nature; although research is of critical importance to industry, as it drives innovation and transformation (Watson et al., 2024). Research active organisations demonstrate improved performance over their counterparts, notably because of dedicated research and development (R&D) functions (Jonker et al., 2019) featuring non-traditional doctoral graduates with strong critical thinking skills obtained from study (Macintosh et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2024). This only reinforces the need for non-traditional students to be just as research active as their PhD counterparts. This impact can be split down further into two parts: academic impact (contributions to the academic community via dissemination), and economic or societal impact (Adams & Neary, 2022). This shows how graduates contribute to society by addressing global issues such as poverty, sustainable development, and social responsibility (Khuram et al., 2023).

Drawing from theories of educational commodification and credential inflation, this study situates NUDQs within a wider neoliberal framework of marketised higher education (Ball, 2012; Brown et al., 2011). The value of the qualification is examined not only in personal terms but as part of a system that monetises

and standardises knowledge acquisition, aligning qualifications with productivity and labour market signalling (Collins, 1979). This lens allows for critique of both the symbolic and economic dimensions of credentialing in the 21st-century academy.

Methodology

The study adopts an analytic autoethnographic stance (Anderson, 2006), using structured self-reflection as a data source. Data was generated through iterative journaling during the qualification, contemporaneous field notes, and retrospective sense-making aligned with emerging themes. Analytical coding was conducted thematically, informed by the research question and concepts of credentialization, professional identity, and educational legitimacy. Autoethnography, as a qualitative research method, allows the researcher to draw on their personal experience (Ngunjiri et al., 2010) in the production of an insider account (Adams & Manning, 2015). A methodology which is growing in use and popularity (Rambo & Ellis, 2020), autoethnography allowed the researcher to demonstrate reflexivity (Wall, 2006) by acknowledging their own subjectivity (Finlay & Gough, 2003) and understanding how their own position and interests affect the findings (Primeau, 2003). Mcilveen (2008) discusses the benefits of autoethnography, notably how it promotes trustworthiness and authenticity of the researcher, by giving transparency of the process as well as the product (Ellis et al., 2011). There are, however, criticisms of autoethnography as a research method. Described as a queer research method (Jones & Adams, 2010), Ploder and Stadlbauer (2016) state it is overly narcissistic and lacks theoretical grounding, whilst Woodley (2016) described it as a threat to disciplinary identity. Wall (2008) noted associated issues of representation, balance, and ethics, although adopting a more analytical approach and maintaining the emotional core of ethnography can address this concern somewhat (Mendez-Lopez, 2014).

Autoethnography can be evocative via personal narrative (Mayor, 2016), or analytic, including input from the community (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnography sits in the wider bracket of ethnography; a type of research focused upon being in the field of study to understand cultures, challenges, and motivations (Arnout et al., 2020). Subsequently, this paper takes an evocative approach, focusing upon the researcher's own experience of identifying, studying, and perceptions of their NUDQ. The researcher reflects upon collected self-observational and self-reflective data, and external data in the form of literature (Chang, 2016; Gautam, 2016), before analysing and interpreting this to allow for link between personal experience and broader cultural contexts (Jones, 2005). Although the paper contains personal narrative elements, it adheres more closely to Anderson's (2006) notion of analytic autoethnography, where the goal is not solely evocation but theoretical insight. The author is a full member of the research setting and uses their experience to interrogate wider systemic forces. Reflexivity is applied not merely to narrate but to critically interpret the sociological significance of the journey, framed through concepts such as educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and credential stratification (Brown et al., 2011).

Discussion

Identity and Barriers

I identify as a "pracademic," an experienced industry professional who decided to transition to academia as a practitioner-academic (Blackler & Miller, 2021; Owens, 2017). I remain active in both domains of academia and practice (Hollweck et al., 2022), primarily employed as a Lecturer in Business by a HEI in the UK, but remaining industry active by conducting occasional consultancy work. As I made the transition from industry to academia, I decided I would seek to undertake doctoral level study, due to motivations which I will discuss later. My first step in doing so was to identify and assess my options, of which there were several:

a) a traditional PhD;

b) a PhD by publication, published works, or portfolio;

c) a professional doctorate, such as DBA or similar; or

d) a NUDQ listed on the Ofqual RRQ in the UK (GOV.UK, 2024).

As a mature learner and "interrupter" (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024), with a full-time job, additional consultancy work, and a young family; I needed more flexibility than a traditional PhD may offer (Williams et al., 2021). With regards to professional doctorates, I was concerned about the lengthy commitment of 5-7 years (Choi et al. 2024), and how my family and work obligations might change over this time, impacting my ability to progress and complete (Dunlap, 2024; Watson et al., 2024). I acknowledge that the PhD by publication, published works, or portfolio route may, however, be a good option in the future (Choi et al., 2024). This left just option d to consider in the present moment.

Turning my attention to NUDQs, I utilised the GOV.UK (2024) qualification search function and compiled a list of options and associated information, presented in Table 1. A qualification offered by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), who I instantly recognised, became my desired choice. I subsequently sought a provider of the CMI Level 8 Diploma in Strategic Direction and Leadership (600/9469/2), seeking one which focuses upon supportive one-to-one coaching practices (Lee et al., 2022), and simple systems to avoid technological challenges (Williams et al., 2021).

Table 1

Level 8 qualifications listed by Ofqual

Number	Title	Owner	Credits	TQT	GLH
600/9467/9	CMI Level 8 Award In Strategic Direction and Leadership	CMI	10	100	30
600/9468/0	CMI Level 8 Certificate In Strategic Direction and Leadership	CMI	20	200	60
600/9469/2	CMI Level 8 Diploma In Strategic Direction and Leadership	CMI	67	670	210
601/5362/3	Qualifi Level 8 Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership	Qualifi	160	1600	640
603/6996/6	OTHM Level 8 Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership Practice	OTHM	180	1800	900
610/2993/2	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre - Cabaret	UWL	25	250	46
610/2994/4	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre - Recital	UWL	25	205	46
610/2995/6	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre - Concert	UWL	25	250	46
610/3003/X	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre DUET	UWL	25	250	46
610/4175/0	IAB L8 Doctor of Business Administration	IAB	180	1800	360
610/4176/2	IAB L8 Doctor of Education	IAB	180	1800	360
610/4177/4	IAB L8 Doctor of Philosophy	IAB	180	1800	360

Motivation

My motivation for studying a NUDQ was two-fold. On one hand, I was concerned that, as a new academic entering the arena without a PhD, I may be viewed differently by my colleagues, students, and others in the industry. I had a distinct fear of being called out on my expertise. Although this has, to date, never occurred, this symptom of imposter syndrome remains (Abdelaal, 2020; Bothello & Roulet, 2018). Upon starting HEI employment, I was surprised to find plenty of "pracademic" colleagues either holding a non-traditional doctorate, working towards this, or not yet at that point in their journey (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). On the other hand, unmotivated by extrinsic academic career goals (Horta, 2018), I wanted to engage in an intrinsic intellectual quest (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skakni, 2018) to achieve top level expertise in business management, from which I could begin contributing new knowledge to the field via practice-oriented research and subsequent dissemination (Terentev et al., 2020).

After enrolling on my Diploma qualification, I worked through seven units as per the structure highlighted in Table 2, completing all Group A mandatory units and one Group B optional unit to a total of 67 credits, 210 guided learning hours (GLH), and 670 hours of total qualification time (TQT), typically completed in approximately 12 months (Next Level Impact, 2024). Each unit consisted of online learning materials to engage with, and a written assessment of between 4000-4500 words to complete. Along the way, I found myself to be intrinsically motivated for the main part, but found my regulatory style shifted to somewhat external (introjected regulation) as per the self-determination continuum (Litalien et al., 2015), as I sought and received approval (small wins) after each unit from my mentor, someone I viewed as a role model, which kept me on track and triggered behavioural change by boosting my self-esteem (Jacobs et al., 2012; Nwosu et al., 2022).

Table 2

Qualification Breakdown

Number	Title	Credits	TUT	GLH
	Mandatory Group A			
8001V1	Personal development as a strategic leader	10	100	30
8002V1	Collective strategy development	10	100	30
8003V1	Inter-organisational strategic planning	10	100	30
8004V1	Inter-organisational strategic direction	10	100	30
8005V1	Strategic communication	10	100	30
8006V1	Strategic culture	10	100	30
	Optional Group B			
7013V1	Strategic leadership	7	70	30
7014V1	Strategic leadership practice	7	70	30

Perceptions

Since completing my NUDQ, I have experienced mixed perceptions surrounding it amongst the academic community. I contacted multiple UK universities to enquire about using it as recognition of prior learning (RPL) towards a university-based professional doctorate (DBA), with one stating that they would "consider applying RPL for the taught phase, allowing fast-track to thesis only," and another stating they would not do this due to "credit value and lack of research relevance" The latter comment surrounding research value confirms Mattijssen et al.'s (2020) findings of a pervasive bias favouring the traditional research focus,

and Germain-Alamartine et al.'s (2021) findings that NUDQs are viewed as more practical by the academic community.

Aside from DBA applications, I also received a negative comment from a member of the academic community that my qualification is "far from academic," reaffirming a bias against NUDQs (Dunlap, 2024) and showing disrespect by downplaying my achievement (Suomi et al., 2020) as being less prestigious than a PhD (Hambrick, 1997; Servage, 2009). Ultimately, my experiences highlight that a) Khuram (2024) is correct in calling for better attitudes towards such qualifications, and b) holders of such qualifications can come together to engage in reputation management to improve the overall perception of their achievements (Winn et al., 2008).

Returning to credit value and research focus, there appears to be inconsistency amongst NUDQs. UK based awarding organisations CMI (Next Level Impact, 2024), Qualifi (2024), and OTHM Qualifications (2024) each offer Level 8 Diplomas, each with varied GLH, TQT, credit value, and research focus: despite demanding a similar workload in terms of unit quantity and subsequent assessment word counts. Furthermore, CMI's qualification does not feature a research-related module. Some also note DBA/MPhil/PhD as a progression option, whilst this is not noted with others. This points to a potential opportunity for awarding organisations to work collaboratively to standardise their respective offerings in terms of credit value and research focus, to assist in aforementioned collective reputation management (Winn et al., 2008). A critical gap, however, remains in understanding how NUDQs compare structurally and functionally to PhD or DBA pathways. For example, traditional professional doctorates in the UK span approximately 540 credits, although the CMI Level 8 NUDQ assessed here comprises just 67 credits. This disparity raises questions around depth, research orientation, and volume of independent work. Sixty-seven credits for up to 31,500 words in total across 7 units seems low, given a 540 credit PhD, at most, is less than 3 times that. It is these inconsistencies which breed poor perceptions. Without parity in volume or academic outputs, NUDQs may struggle to gain equivalence in credibility, highlighting the need for clearer qualification frameworks and more explicit positioning within academic hierarchies.

Impact

I have broken down my doctoral level impact into academic (research dissemination) and societal (economic or social contributions), as per ESRC (Adams & Neary, 2022)). In terms of academic impact, my qualification triggered post-completion focus on research due to increased subject matter expertise and decreased imposter syndrome (Jonker et al., 2019). I have subsequently been awarded funding, worked on several projects resulting in the publication of peer-reviewed papers, and delivered an award-winning presentation at the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT) International Research Conference (IRC) 2024 (APIIT, 2024). As noted by Mosanya (2021), I am now engaged in collaborative research in the spirit of peer co-development and professional networking discussed by Macintosh et al. (2021). Ultimately, my qualification gave me the potential to drive my societal impact in addressing global challenges through future research-driven contributions (Khuram et al., 2023).

In relation to societal, economic, or social contributions (Adams & Neary, 2022), NUDQ completion allowed me to successfully obtain Chartered Fellow status (CMgr FCMI) with CMI, an accolade valued by industry (Watson et al., 2024). CMI (Next Level Impact, 2024) state achieving Chartered status increases an individual's self-awareness skills in 91% of cases and improves management skills in 81% of cases, with 95% achieving organisational results and 81% using their skills to lead people during change. I am in the majority here as I find myself now much more focused on inter- and intra-organisational relationships (key themes in the qualification). This focus has seen me strike up strong relationships with wider departments and other organisations, in my role as a Lecturer in Business. I have subsequently played a part in delivering a significant increase in student numbers associated with my course, just one example of the practical impact of my newfound knowledge. Despite my achievements, I came out of the qualification with more gaps than I went in with, which I feel is a symptom of increased self-awareness which has fuelled a concrete plan to improve further.

Conclusion

This autoethnography contributes to current theory exploring the impact and perceptions of professional doctorate vs traditional PhD routes, and the motivations and barriers of those that study them; by adding another avenue to the debate: the alternative pathway of non-university doctoral qualifications. Subsequently, this paper recommends that scholar practitioners considering flexible and practice-oriented doctoral level study which aligns with their personal and professional commitments, take seriously the option of the qualification route, either as a stepping stone towards a doctorate, or as a final resolution. Furthermore, it recommends that NUDQ holders come together to collectively reshape the perceptions of their qualifications by strongly defending their rigour. The wider academic community, and business schools specifically, can play a part in this by celebrating their peers' achievements of NUDQs in the same way they would a traditional doctorate. The paper also recommends that awarding organisations, including CMI, Qualifi, and OTHM Qualifications, standardise GLH, TQT, credit value, research focus, and progression pathways of their respective NUDQ offerings to ensure consistency.

Limitations of this paper include the restrictive nature of autoethnographic input, (i.e., utilising the lived experiences of a single author). It is also noted that experiences of scholar practitioners with varied demographic factors, such as the nine protected characteristics, may vary. Furthermore, the author's experience may have been positively or negatively skewed by their chosen qualification option, training provider, and own academic network. This paper, therefore, recommends extensive qualitative study into this research matter, achieving a diverse sample population to capture the professional identity, motivations, perceptions, and impact of study for those individuals. Finally, the study is UK-based, where non-university doctoral qualifications are regulated and recognised by a non-ministerial government body. Although qualification such as those by CMI are offered to an international audience, non-UK residents may experience varied response and recognition to the achievement of such a qualification.

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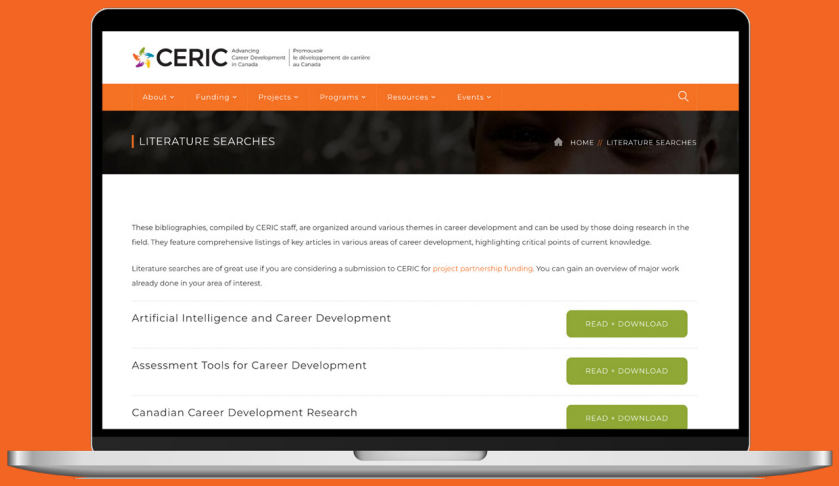

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