

**Assisting High School Students with Career Indecision Using a Shortened Form  
of the Career Construction Interview**

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### **Abstract**

A shortened form of the Career Construction Interview (CCI) was used to help high school students struggling with the career decision making process. The shortened instrument is described, as well as, its use with eleventh grade high school students who had low levels of career concern and career curiosity. Students who completed the exercise reported several themes that are introduced and discussed in the article. These themes reflected that the intervention was helpful and facilitated student self-understanding and career exploration. Practical applications for school counselors are discussed.

*Keywords:* Career Construction Interview, high school students, school counselor, career, career indecision, CMI Form C

## **Assisting High School Students with Career Indecision Using a Shortened Form of the Career Construction Interview**

High school counselors face multiple challenges in helping students today. One of those challenges is providing career development that guides students toward work which is an "...important and satisfying means of personal expression" (American School Counselor Association, 2004, C: C1.7). Some concrete aspects of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Standards (2004) such as learning to write a resume and using the Internet to conduct a career search are easily addressed. However, many students even with the help of school counselors still run into difficulty when it comes to synthesizing information from typical career assessments into educational, career and life goals (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010; Toman & Savickas, 1997). Therefore, many students may move on from secondary school without gaining insight into themselves or how their past and present interests can help guide their future (Savickas, 2011; 2013). Although presented with tools to explore careers some students do not engage in the process, are not concerned or curious about careers and are not career-ready when they leave school (Gysbers, 2013; Savickas, 2011, 2013). These students often experience a lack of connection between what they are exposed to in the school setting and the world of work that soon lies before them (Gysbers, 2013).

This innovative method sought to creatively address student's career development by using a shortened version of the Career Construction Interview (CCI) (Savickas, 2012). The goal was to explore if school counselors could use this briefer narrative tool to increase student's levels of career concern, control, curiosity, and

confidence (Savickas, 2005a, 2013). These career adaptability dimensions help people “implement their self-concept in occupational roles” (Savickas & Porfeli, 2011). Concern reflects an awareness of the need to plan for the future. Control means the ability to take deliberate action. Curiosity denotes an attitude of being realistic and engaged in the planning process; and confidence refers to the ability to move forward with the knowledge that achievement is possible (Hartung & Borges, 2005). For students with higher levels of career adaptability, meaningful decision making is not only an attainable standard; it is also related to a greater sense of personal well-being (Hirschi, 2009). However, for students who exhibit low levels of career adaptability, interventions can help to promote growth in this area. When assessing career development needs, the problem should dictate the intervention that is used (Savickas, 1996). For example, writing an autobiography is one intervention aimed at increasing concern. Likewise, teaching students career exploration strategies such as information gathering, clarifying values, job simulations, and shadowing workers have been shown to increase curiosity (Busacca, 2007; Savickas, 2005a). Support for such interventions is indicated by studies suggesting that students who do not exhibit career decision-making strengths may be more susceptible to mental health issues, delinquency, and drug and alcohol use (Gore, Kadish, & Aseltine, 2003; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007).

### **An Innovative Intervention**

A modified version of the Career Construction Interview (CCI) (Savickas, 2011; 2013) was used as a school counseling tool hoping to increase student’s levels of career concern and curiosity, moving them forward in the process of career exploration and commitment. The CCI is based on career construction theory and is designed to

give voice to a person's story through exploration of life themes (Savickas, 1989, 2005). In contrast to employing career instruments to assess interests or other attributes, the CCI focuses on the process of building meaning and understanding of one's life and work roles (Savickas, 2005, 2011). This is helpful to students who may not yet benefit from the trait-and-factor approach often used in many high school career development programs (Savickas, 2001, p.53). Five factors have been shown to lead to positive career counseling changes (Whiston & Rahardja, 2008). Typical high school career development programs include only the first three factors including written activities, career research, and exposure to those successful in a chosen career path. However, by adding the CCI the final two factors of individualized interpretation with feedback and attention to building support are also addressed (Whiston & Rahardja, 2008). Therefore, it was hoped that when the CCI intervention was added, students' struggling the most with the career development process would make significant progress.

The complete CCI consists of five to eight questions that explore areas such as how clients can solve their present career issues, work environment preferences, and specific interests (Busacca, 2007; Savickas, 2005a, 2013; Taber, Hartung, Briddick, Briddick, & Rehfuss, 2011). However, completing the CCI usually takes two sessions of 90 minutes each preventing its practical use with the large number of students found in school settings (Savickas, 2009). The authors, therefore, attempted to shorten the instrument and condense the time needed for its implementation. Only three of the original eight CCI questions were used in this shortened CCI and it will be referred to as the CCI Short Form (CCI-SF): 1) "Who did you admire when you were growing up?" This question is aimed at learning about the student's role models and elicits

information regarding how a student's difficulties might be surmounted. 2) "Tell me your favorite saying or motto." This question reflects self-advice the student can use to help solve their current problem; and 3), "Tell me about your three favorite books, movies, websites, magazines, TV shows, hobbies, or extracurricular activities (you may choose any combination of these)." This question is designed to reveal the student's preference for a work environment as well as information about specific interests (see Appendix A). Since not all students would be in need of increasing their career concern and curiosity, some form of screening was necessary to identify those who would benefit the most from the intervention.

### **Screening of Students**

The Career Maturity Inventory Counseling Form C (CMI Form C, Savickas & Porfeli, 2011) was the screening instrument selected to identify students scoring significantly low on the career adaptabilities of career concern and/or career curiosity. The CMI Form C is an overall measure of student career adaptabilities that can identify career choice readiness and guide counselor's in selecting appropriate interventions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2011). The tool consists of 24 items, with six items for each of the dimensions of career adaptability (concern, curiosity, confidence, consultation) resulting in five scores, one for each dimension and then a total score. The authors were focused on screening for students struggling with career concern and curiosity and those scale scores range from 0 to 6 (Concern,  $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ; Curiosity,  $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) (p. 28). A student receives a score of zero for each statement that they answer "agree" and a score of one for each "disagree." The concern scale score relates to a student's level of engagement in the decision-making process. Sample items are:

“There is no point in deciding on a job when the future is so uncertain,” and “I’m not going to worry about choosing an occupation until I am out of school.” The curiosity scale score reflects level of career exploration, including items such as, “I don’t know how to go about getting into the kind of work I want to do,” and “I don’t know whether my occupational plans are realistic.” In their initial study, Savickas and Porfeli (2011) reported the standard scores for their 11<sup>th</sup> grade students on both the concern scale ( $M = 4.66, SD = 1.42$ ) (p. 26) and the curiosity scale ( $M = 2.30, SD = 1.76$ ) (p. 26).

Therefore, students with scores of more than standard deviation below the mean on either the concern or curiosity scales would be identified as those in greatest need and selected to receive the CCI-SF intervention (Savickas & Porfeli, 2011). In addition to screening for those most in need, the authors predetermined that measures of change were needed to assess if the intervention was helpful to the students career decision making process.

### **Measuring Outcomes**

Two instruments were used to measure outcomes of the intervention. The Future Career Autobiography (FCA) (Reh fuss, 2009a; Reh fuss & Di Fabio, 2012) and a follow-up survey (see Appendix B). The FCA was the first measure used and assessed whether or not a change occurred in the student’s narrative as a result of participating in the CCI-SF. The FCA is a qualitative measure used to evaluate whether narrative and constructivist career interventions affect a person’s life and occupational narratives (Reh fuss, 2009, Reh fuss & Di Fabio, 2011). The measure draws out an individual’s future narrative related to life and occupation by asking where they hope to be in life and what they hope to be doing occupationally in five years (Reh fuss, 2009). When the

FCA is given to an individual before (initial FCA) and after (final FCA) a career intervention, it can provide an objective measure of change or lack of change in an individual's narrative. The initial and final FCA's are compared side by side and measured for indications of change in the individual's words and themes. Rehfuss (2009) identified four general quality of life themes, two general occupational desire themes, and eight specific themes related to movement in an individual's career process known as the degrees of change themes. By comparing the initial and final FCA's, it is possible to identify the themes and assess individual progress or lack of progress. This FCA has also been used as an effective assessment tool with the full CCI intervention (Rehfuss, Del Corso, Glavin, & Wykes, 2011; Rehfuss & Di Fabio, 2012). The second outcome measure was a five-question follow-up survey (see Appendix B) given to each student who received the CCI-SF intervention. It focused on gathering student feedback about the effects of the intervention from their perspective. It included questions about how helpful the experience was as a career planning tool; what types of follow-up career exploration activities the student had completed; and what resources could be used to support their continued career exploration efforts.

### **Screening Process**

After receiving approval from the suburban New England school district and the university HSRB a random half of the counselor's junior student case load (63 students) was contacted by mail and during a homeroom period. Of this initial group, 28 students indicated a desire to participate in the method by returning a parental consent form. These students were equally split between female and male with their self-identified ethnicities including 82% ( $n = 23$ ) Caucasian/White; 7% ( $n = 2$ ) African American/Black

and 11% ( $n = 3$ ) "Other." Student's indicated that their GPA's on a weighted 4.0 scale were: 1.0-1.9 ( $n = 2$ ); 2.0-2.9 ( $n = 8$ ); 3.0-3.9 ( $n = 12$ ); and 4.0+ ( $n = 6$ ). Nearly all of the students (92.9%) reported having at least one parent who had attended a four-year college. These 28 students met as a group in a classroom during a free school period to complete the screening tool (CMI Form C) and the initial outcome tool (initial FCA). Students with scores of more than one standard deviation below the mean on the concern and/or curiosity scales of the CMI Form C were selected for the intervention. Of the 28 students, 11 students or about 40% qualified to complete the CCI-SF intervention. Two of these students, however, declined further participation resulting in a final group of 9 students, five females and four males, all Caucasian/White, two thirds with GPA's of 3.0 or higher, and all had at least one parent who had attended a four-year college.

### **Intervention Process**

One week after completing the initial measures in the group, the nine selected students met individually with the school counselor to complete the CCI-SF. Each interview session took about 45 minutes and was conducted during the counselor's office hours. The counselor followed procedures typical of the full CCI intervention as described by Savickas (2005a, 2013). At the beginning of each interview session, the student was told that the counselor would take thorough notes of their responses to be used as a reference in the career planning work that they were doing together (Savickas, 2005a, 2013). Students were encouraged to answer the three CCI-SF questions with as much description as possible (Savickas, 2005a, 2013). When necessary, the counselor would use prompts such as, "Can you tell me more about

that?” to elicit supporting details. At the conclusion of the interview portion, the counselor reviewed and identified with the student’s assistance, the narrative themes highlighted in their responses (Savickas, 2005a, 2013). These include repeated words, phrases and ideas communicated during the interview (Savickas, 2005a, 2013). Then the counselor and student in a give and take dialogue explored the possible meanings of the themes and how this information might influence future career choices (Savickas, 2005a, 2013). In addition, prior to the end of the session, the counselor briefly reviewed a web-based career and college search resource that the student could use for further career exploration. One week after these individual CCI-SF interviews, the nine students met as a group in a classroom to complete the Final FCA and the follow-up survey.

## **Results**

After the CCI-SF intervention and completion of the follow-up survey and final FCA, the authors explored the impact of the intervention by reviewing the FCA’s and follow-up survey. The results of these two instruments are presented here in narrative form so the reader can experience and validate the changes that took place.

### **FCA**

Overall, seven of the nine students’ FCA’s showed evidence of change in their occupational narratives. Meaning their FCA’s reflected a clear change related to their career decision making. The FCA refers to these changes as themes in degrees of change. Each theme name indicates the type of change that was noted between the student’s two FCA’s and movement is from the first towards the second. Degrees of change themes reflected in the students’ FCA’s include: general fields and desires to

specification and exploration ( $n = 2$ ); general interests to more specification ( $n = 3$ ); vagueness to focus ( $n = 1$ ); and fixation to openness ( $n = 1$ ). The remaining students ( $n = 2$ ) showed no change in their narratives, demonstrating the theme of stagnation. Here are examples of each theme from the FCA's and some of the student's other actions that support their statements taken from their follow-up survey.

**General fields and desires to specification and exploration.** One student's initial FCA stated, "I enjoy English, history and think that I would enjoy psychology." In the Final FCA, she said, "Perhaps I will be interested in one of these possible jobs; although, I would still like to learn more about them: social worker, real estate agent, business women [*sic*] - marketing, PR, communications." One week after the final session, this student had secured a job shadow experience focused on the business side of a not-for-profit organization.

**General interests to more specification.** "I would really like to be in the city, preferably NYC working on pursuing a job in the realm of fashion," were the words of one student prior to the CCI-SF. In her final FCA, she noted, "Meeting new people, brainstorming a company that uses connections I have to help people nationally or worldwide." During the course of the CCI-SF, this student expressed an interest in a fashion-related business that would donate part of its proceeds to charitable organizations.

**Vagueness to focus.** This theme is often represented by an initial FCA that is uncertain and includes no description of the future that changes to general options in the second one. The student began his initial FCA with this sentence: "Well, 5 years from now, I really have no idea what I will be doing." In his final FCA he wrote, "5 years

from now, I hope to be doing something that I love doing; this could involve business, engineering and helping others.” An example from another study the student stated; “I have no idea what I’ll be doing, career wise. I hope to have a job of some kind.” While in the follow up she stated, “I hope to be working in a PR firm as an event planner.” (Reh fuss, 2009a, pp 87.)

**Fixation to openness.** An example of this theme was present in the following narrative change: initial FCA - “If I have a job, I want it to be dancing and performing....I will be perfecting my dance skills....Also, I want to be able to teach dance...”;final FCA - “Five years from now, I hope to either be dancing professionally or maybe be a social worker and help underprivileged kids.”

**Stagnation.** Two students essentially wrote the same narrative both times, such as, “I’m hoping to live in a cool place and have a job.” This type of response indicates that even after the intervention they still had made no progress in their career decision making process.

### **Follow-up Survey**

The follow-up survey (see Appendix B) explored the student’s experience with participating in the CCI-SF career counseling interview and sheds more light on their experience with this process. After engaging in the CCI-SF intervention seven of the nine students reported thinking more about their career plans; two had engaged in three to four career exploration activities; six had completed one to two activities; and one student reported engaging in no additional activities. The most frequently reported activity was discussing one’s career ideas with others ( $n = 7$ ), followed by reviewing career information in a book or on a website ( $n = 3$ ). When identifying additional

resources that might benefit their career planning, further career counseling ( $n = 6$ ) and working with a mentor ( $n = 5$ ) were the most frequent responses. Surprisingly, all of the students ( $n = 9$ ) rated the experience as helpful or very helpful, citing the individualized attention, experience of greater self-awareness, and improved career focus as some of the most positive aspects. Several of the students also clearly communicated an integration of self-understanding and the career process in their final comments: “I liked how the experience revealed more about my personality and how it correlates to my career interests,” and “It was nice to discuss possible career paths that would play to my interests and strengths.” Finally, students suggested several improvements such as increasing the length of the intervention to allow for more in-depth discussion and researching career information with the school counselor’s guidance.

### **Discussion and Practical Applications**

The CCI-SF appears to be a helpful tool to assist high school students in their career decision making, especially, if they are lacking in their career curiosity and concern. Overall, most ( $n = 7$ ) of the students that engaged in the CCI-SF interview expressed a degree of change in their career narratives including greater specificity, openness to new ideas, increased focus, and active exploration. As noted by Rehfuss (2009), such changes are expected as “individuals begin to embrace and enact career exploration and specification” (p. 90). Nearly every student ( $n = 8$ ) also reported initiating career exploration activities following the CCI-SF. Initiating changes in one’s career narrative and actively engaging in career exploration are outcomes consistent with the goal of this intervention and appear to support its use with high school students

lacking career curiosity or concern. Finally, all nine of the students indicated that the CCI-SF interview process was helpful or very helpful.

The CCI-SF also aided some of these students in integrating self-understanding into the career decision making process. For some students, synthesizing information from quantitative career assessments into a career goal is a difficult task. When presented with results of interest and personality inventories these students do not readily demonstrate the ability to connect self-knowledge with the career planning process; and therefore, remain stagnant or frozen in the process. As Super (1955, as cited in Savickas, 2001) noted, young people who have not reached career maturity need interventions that facilitate their self-understanding so that they can move on in the process. Several of the students in this study, clearly communicated this type of integration in their final comments about the experience. The results suggest that for most of these eleventh grade students with low career concern and curiosity, the CCI-SF intervention helped them to begin to recognize how their interests could be integrated with career activities and it moved them along in the process of career commitment.

The authors also found that the CMI Form C was an efficient screening tool to identify students most in need of further career interventions. Choosing to screen the students prior to engaging in a more intensive career intervention was necessary given the school counselor's caseload, existing scheduled guidance sessions and typical counseling activities. Attempting to use the CCI-SF with every student would be very difficult for most school counselors given that only five of fifty states meet the recommended student-to-counselor ratios (Sable & Plotts, 2010). By using the CMI

Form C as a screening tool, the school counselor's time and effort was effectively used to target those most in need. As standardized testing helps schools identify students who need help with academic skill building, the CMI Form C can be used as a method to screen for students who need more focused career counseling. As career counseling is just one component of a comprehensive school counseling program, time spent on career interventions must be balanced with supporting students' academic and personal/social needs. In this case, screening enabled the counselor to estimate how many students needed additional assistance and helped to determine how best to incorporate the CCI-SF intervention into the confines of the existing school counseling program.

The combination of using the CMI Form C to identify and the CCI-SF as an intervention could be integrated into a comprehensive school counseling program much as it was here, during the fall of the students' junior year. This is the point in student's development where most are beginning to clarify and implement plans for their future after graduation. By integrating this intervention into the existing guidance program, students needing more help could quickly be identified and provided the assistance needed to refine their career goals and desires prior graduation. Integration of this model could also help students to engage in other career exploration and discussion activities as was demonstrated by these students.

It must be noted that the school counselor involved in this exploration was familiar with the students who engaged in the CCI-SF and found that this prior knowledge facilitated the process. Though Savickas (2005b) made it clear that no relationship is needed to use the CCI successfully, background knowledge of the

students aided in the exploration of their life themes and understanding of their influencing contexts. The experience and knowledge gained from the CCI-SF intervention was a very beneficial for later guidance and counseling interactions and continued to facilitate relationships with these students overtime. Though this intervention appeared to work well with these students, it needs to be studied with larger and more diverse groups of students. However, the positive changes reflected in the students' FCA narratives and the self-reported benefits they received suggest the usefulness of the CCI-SF as a school counseling tool.

### **Summary**

As school counselors seek ways to assess students' career counseling needs and apply appropriate interventions, the CCI-SF should be considered. By incorporating this narrative and constructivist approach to career counseling with high school students, students will gain the opportunity to explore their life themes, build their sense of personal meaning, and enhance their understanding of future career options. This exploration clearly demonstrated that the CCI-SF intervention assisted these high school students in moving forward in their career decision-making process. Such individual growth and development is vital to facilitating students' success both in high school and across the lifespan, and the CCI-SF appears to be one intervention that can help school counselors achieve this goal.

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## Appendix A

### Career Construction Interview - High School Form

1. Who did you admire when you were growing up? List three heroes/heroines/role models. Tell me about them.
  - a. What do you admire about each of these role models?
  - b. How are you like each of them?
  - c. How are you different from them?
2. Tell me your favorite saying or motto.
3. Tell me about your 3 favorite: books, movies, websites, magazines, TV shows, hobbies, or extracurricular activities (you may choose any combination of these). What do you like about each one?

**Appendix B**  
**Follow-up Survey**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) Since completing the Career Construction Interview, how would you describe your level of concern about your future career plans?
  - a) My level of concern is the same
  - b) I have thought more about my career plans
  
- 2) Since completing the Career Construction Interview, which of the following career exploration activities have you completed:
  - a) I reviewed career information in a book or on a website
  - b) I discussed my career ideas with other people (parents, friends, etc.)
  - c) I initiated a job shadow, internship, or informational interview with a person in a career of interest to me
  - d) I investigated educational/training programs related to my career interest(s)
  - e) Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - f) None
  
- 3) Overall, how would you rate the Career Construction Interview as a career planning tool?
  - a) Very helpful
  - b) Helpful
  - c) Somewhat helpful
  - d) Not helpful
  
- 4) Please explain the rating you gave in question 3. What was most/least helpful about your experience with the Career Construction Interview?
  
  
- 5) What additional resources would be most beneficial to your career planning efforts?
  - a) Further career counseling
  - b) Working with a mentor
  - c) Assessments to help me learn more about myself
  - d) Other \_\_\_\_\_

### **Biographical Statements**

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Pamela H. Sickinger, Ph.D., LPC, NCC is a school counselor at Simsbury High School in Simsbury, Connecticut and an adjunct professor at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut. Across her career, she has worked with students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Additionally, she has provided group and individual counseling, career counseling, and transition services through work in a practice that specializes in the needs of people with autism spectrum disorder. Her research interests include career counseling and development, school counselor evaluation practices, and school counselor education and supervision.