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Application of Transformative Learning Theory in a Training Program for Career Counsellors

Isanović Hadžiomerovic, Amina
amina.isanovic@ff.unsa.ba, University of Sarajevo

Abstract

Context: This paper explores the potential of transformative learning theory (TLT) to serve as a framework for career counsellor training. Currently, due to the lack of a study program in career guidance and counselling (CGC), lack of standard in this regard, as well as the underdevelopment of the profession in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), practitioners working in CGC have different professional backgrounds ranging from education sciences, psychology, social work or related disciplines who develop competencies in career counselling either through non-formal programs or self-directed learning. This diverse entry into the practice of CGC highlights the need for a well-founded training program developing relevant competencies and professional ethics.

Approach: TLT is found to be particularly relevant in this context as it fosters personal development by encouraging individuals to revise their perspective and frames of reference. To empirically explore this assumption, the study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the experiences of trainees coming from diverse professional backgrounds who participated in training programs for career counsellors. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten participants who completed the training capturing their subjective interpretations and meaning-making processes.

Findings: Analysis revealed that trainees experienced transformative learning across three key processes. First, they expanded and revised their existing systems of knowledge related to CGC. Second, they engaged with new meaning schemes associated with CGC and attempted to internalize them. Finally, participants recognized the limitations of their previous frames of reference and reported a conscious effort to reorganize and transform them in the context of CGC. The findings suggest that the training programs created conditions that facilitated transformative learning, which participants described as both professionally and personally empowering.

Conclusions: Data show that TLT provides a valuable theoretical and practical framework for training career counsellors, especially in such contexts where trainees come with already formed professional identities. By focusing on meaning-making and personal development, TLT encourages deep, reflective learning that enhances counsellors' capacity to support others

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in career learning. This research offers a theoretically relevant insight and practical implications for the design of a training program in CGC.

Keywords

career guidance and counselling (CGC), practitioners, transformative learning theory (TLT), training program, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

1 Introduction

Career guidance and counselling (CGC) is often in literature described as an emerging, semi or quasi profession (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022; Allan & Moffett, 2015), referring to the lack of a differentiated academic discipline, research based on a solid theoretical framework and with a strong role of policymakers in outlining the field of practice instead of experts themselves. This is also supported by Neary and Hutchinson (2009), who argue that CGC has not yet reached the full professionalization because it has been slow to develop a body of theory around an academic discipline. The *NICE Handbook* (Schiersmann et al., 2012) further underlines this acknowledging that professionalism in CGC should be developed around an academic discipline as a point of orientation, with knowledge, methods and goals as elements of standards regulating professional and research activity.

In societies undergoing transitions such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), CGC faces additional conceptual and practical challenges. In the context of a changing world of work, economic instability, and social vulnerability (Eurofound, 2024), traditional career orientation models rooted in matching individuals to occupational roles are no longer sufficient. Instead, there is an emerging need for counsellors' competencies to support persons in complex realities throughout the lifespan. However, a more systematic development of this area is hampered by the lack of standards related to CGC.

In this context, Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), as conceptualized by Mezirow (1981), offers a viable framework for training career counsellors. Unlike models that prioritize procedural or skills-based learning, TLT emphasizes critical reflection, perspective transformation and identity development, all of which are processes essential for counsellor's competency to support others through complex life and career transitions. Against this backdrop, the present research explores how non-formal training programs in CGC offered to persons of various professions a possibility to foster professional and personal transformation. Previous research (Murphy, 2021) showed how TLT can serve as a pedagogical framework to help student affairs professionals better support students' orientation in higher education.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this paper presents research based on the experiences of ten individuals who completed a non-formal training program built around TLT principles. They emphasized the importance of critical reflection, dialogue, and experience in facilitating deep, meaningful learning that challenges and alters existing frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). The two CGC training programs were implemented in learning environments that encouraged critical questioning, fostered mutual exchange and supported learners in probing and integrating CGC into their professional identities. Both programs offered practical parts where trainees were engaged in designing and implementing a career counselling process with specific groups (e.g. youth, unemployed women).

This research questions whether and how trainee's learning experiences in the program were transformative, and what are the potentials of TLT to be used as a framework for designing a training program for career counsellors.

2 Career Guidance in Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, CGC is not recognized as an independent profession, but rather is considered a part of other professions (such as Pedagogy or Psychology). The activities within the CGC in the formal education system are most often delivered by school pedagogues, psychologists, social workers, or subject teachers, many of whom lack formal education in guidance and counselling. CGC is still dominantly perceived as related to education choices during youth. Besides schools, employment institutes also have a role in providing for CGC, specifically to unemployed persons. However, in practice, their activity is more often limited to registering unemployed persons, while providing for learning activities is present in rare cases, and sometimes supported by international projects (Husremović, Čarapina Zovko, & Vardo, 2024).

Looking at CGC in BiH through the defining features of professionalization (Castro 1992 cited after Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022); scientific authority or expertise, public trust, autonomy, jurisdiction, collective organisation and an ethical code of conduct leads us to specific findings. University study programs in Pedagogy or Psychology include a course related to career guidance and counselling, while there is no study program in BiH specifically dedicated to CGC. Professional development opportunities are rare, and those who do engage in CGC often do so without adequate theoretical or practical training. The absence of standards for career guidance and counselling practice limits opportunities for quality assurance. There is no professional association in BiH specifically dedicated to career guidance counsellors, and thus no formal ethical code or advocacy body to represent their interests. Without a solid professional framework, CGC in BiH lacks coherence and legitimacy as a field. As a result, practitioners often enter the field without a solid theoretical grounding in career learning and development, career psychology or counselling methodology.

Career orientation activities in the schooling system of BiH represent a small part of the overall school counsellors' workload encompassing whole range of activities directed to supporting students, teachers, parents and cooperation with the local community. A typical way of implementing career orientation in schools throughout BiH is through activities organized during specific classes in the final years of elementary (grade 9) or secondary school (grade 3 or 4) through workshops and using various assessment instruments. It is often an add-on to existing roles of pedagogues, teachers, psychologists and social workers. In practice, career guidance in schools is often treated as a peripheral activity, lacking systemic integration and is rarely evaluated for quality or impact. School-level implementation depends heavily on individual initiative, often without formal support from school management. Reports indicate that career guidance and counselling activities are limited to occasional presentations or information days and are not embedded in a broader vision of career education or lifelong learning (Markuš et al, 2022).

In 2015, *Career Orientation* was introduced as a cross-curricular area from pre-school to secondary school curriculum (APOSO, 2015). However, PISA results from 2018 showed that fewer than 10% of students in BiH attended schools that offered structured career guidance (Schleicher, 2019), in stark contrast to OECD averages of 60-65%. In this whole-school approach to career education, subject teachers are bearers of practical activities, however, it is right to ask of whether they have relevant competences for such a role. This implies that for an effective implementation of Career Orientation as a cross-curricular area, teachers should complete a training in CGC as part of professional development. However, to date no such a training

program designed specifically for school teachers has been developed. Designing one should start with the fact that CGC has become part of various occupational roles and competencies acquired in it need to be – to put it in Piagetian terms – assimilated and accommodated (Scott & Cougburn, 2023) into an already existing professional identity.

Training for career counsellors frequently occurs through non-formal education, with varying quality, scope or conceptual framework, which are provided most commonly by civil society organisations (CSOs) and adult education centers. A number of questions raise with regard to non-formal programs for practitioners in CGC. One of them is whether these competences can be effectively acquired within a limited timeframe and whether they become an internalized part of a practitioner's professional identity (Neary, 2014) or remain merely an additional skill-set. Furthermore, an important consideration is the transferability of career guidance competences across diverse groups and contexts, such as working with youth, the long-term unemployed, women or other specific populations. To address these questions thoroughly, a more comprehensive study should be undertaken. In this research, our aim was to explore the extent to which the already implemented training programs facilitated transformative learning in the participants.

3 Theoretical Framework: Tranformative Learning Theory (TLT)

TLT, introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, is nowadays considered one of the most influential theories in adult education (Illeris, 2018). It seeks to explain how adults make transformation of meaning perspective, which is defined as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 74). Mezirow (1991) observed that adult learners encounter "disorienting dilemmas", events or experiences that challenge their habitual ways of thinking and understanding the world. These dilemmas trigger a process of reflection and reassessment that can lead to a transformation of meaning perspective. For this specific feature, TLT seemed to be applicable as a framework for a CGC training program for professionals already having developed professional identity in another field.

According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is defined as the process through which individuals become critically aware of their previously unquestioned assumptions and revise them if necessary. The revised perspectives are then integrated into their frames of reference and guide future actions. Mezirow (2009) differentiates between instrumental learning, which focuses on learning to control or manipulate the environment, and communicative learning, which involves understanding the values, intentions, and meaning embedded in communication and social interactions. In the context of CGC, an example of instrumental learning would be acquiring skills of conducting interviews or individualizing CGC process, while communicative learning would refer to understanding social context framing individuals' career decisions. This distinction emphasizes that transformative learning is not limited to the acquisition of knowledge or skills but includes deeper cognitive, emotional and relational movements.

A transformative learning process involves ten phases, beginning with a disorienting dilemma, followed by self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition of shared experiences of discontent and the process of transformation, exploration of new roles, relationship and action, planning a course of action, acquisition of knowledge for implementing new plans, trying out new roles, building of competence and self-confidence and reintegration into the reality with the new perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

In the field of CGC, transformative processes are highly relevant. CGC practitioners regularly work with individuals facing uncertainty, identity confusion, or life transitions – all of which can be disorienting dilemmas. Practitioners thus face the need to support other persons' learning and to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection to examine their own biases, values and assumptions. In this sense, transformative learning is as much about the professional development of CGC practitioners as it is about the growth of the persons they work with. The question arises of how do individuals experience the learning process as transformative, and in what ways do these experiences align with or diverge from the core theoretical assumptions of TLT, particularly in relation to critical self-reflection, questioning assumptions and changing meaning perspectives?

4 Methodology

4.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The present research employed IPA as its methodological framework, which is particularly found suited for examining how individuals make sense of meaningful and potentially transformative experiences. IPA is a qualitative research approach grounded in three key theoretical underpinnings: *phenomenology*, *hermeneutics*, and *idiography* (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). In alignment with the aims of this research – to explore participants' subjective experiences of a non-formal training program informed by the principles of TLT – IPA provided a valuable lens through which to investigate how meaning was constructed, challenged and redefined through the learning process.

In line with IPA's idiographic orientation, the study employed a purposive sample of ten participants who shared the common experience of completing a non-formal training program in CGC. The sample was intentionally small and relatively homogenous, allowing for in-depth, case-by-case analysis of individual narratives before identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across cases.

4.2 Research Process

Ten participants (seven women and three men) were selected for in-depth interviews. The selection was based on their prior participation in a CGC training program. These programs are not offered regularly in BiH, so the participants' selection was already limited to three organisations that have implemented some form of CGC training over the past three years. The participants' age ranged from 27 to 45, eight of them were employed and two unemployed. None of the participants works full time in CGC, and all of them are practicing it for several months as a side activity. Participants' professional backgrounds were diverse: three were from psychology, two from pedagogy, and the others from management, law, economics, social sciences, engineering, and natural sciences.

All participants had completed a non-formal training program in CGC. Programs were delivered in two organisations, and were first analyzed to identify whether they contained potential to elucidate transformative learning processes. Both programs included experiential learning components, reflective exercises, group discussions and elements of critical self-questioning, all of which are considered essential conditions for transformative learning. Structured activities such as case study analysis, intervision sessions and value clarification tasks were designed to challenge participants' existing assumptions, foster self-awareness and encourage meaning-making.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview guide contained three questions that were asked all interview participants;

1. How did the CGC training program supported you personal questioning and exploration?
2. What did you find specifically significant experiences related to your personal and professional identity during the CGC training program?
3. How do you perceive your role and competences in CGC?

Given the open nature of a semi-structured interview, additional questions were posed according to the flow of each individual conversation.

4.3 Data analysis process

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed so to keep the idiographic nature of IPA, meaning that each interview was analyzed separately following a set of steps (Smith & Osborn, 2003):

1. Looking for themes in each individual case
2. Writing down emerging themes titles
3. Clustering of themes, checking in the transcripts to make sure that connections work for the primary source material
4. Organizing findings in the master table for the whole group.

Given the relatively small number of cases, it was feasible to apply all stages of the IPA analytical process to each individual interview transcript in full. Initially, each case was analyzed separately, allowing for a detailed examination of the participant's unique experience. Following this, patterns of convergence and divergence were explored across cases. In the second phase, emphasis was placed on identifying expressions that could support theoretical connections both within and across cases, while remaining grounded in the specific language and context of each participant's account. During this phase, the entire transcript was treated as data; no sections were excluded or prioritized, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive analysis. In the third phase, a master table of themes was constructed, organizing emerging clusters into coherent, superordinate themes. Participants were coded with capital letters from A to J, in the order in which interviews were conducted.

5 Results

Analysis of ten interviews resulted in identifying five overarching themes which reflect how participants experienced the learning process during the non-formal training program for CGC practitioners and transformative elements in it. A master table of themes and sub-themes contains thematic analysis across individual cases, reflecting both convergence and divergence among participants (Table 1).

Theme 1: Self-perception and competence recognition

Participants reported having experienced the shift from self-doubt and deficit-based thinking to greater self-awareness and recognition of existing competencies. Several participants

entered the program with a limited understanding of their own strengths related to CGC, which they discovered later, during the program. “I wanted to become a career counsellor in order to help persons not to make similar mistakes in career choices as I did.” [*Participant G, a biological engineer,* woman, aged 32]. Through structured reflection, mentoring, and peer feedback, participants were encouraged to identify and articulate their CGC-relevant skills. This process enabled a transformation in self-perception, promoting a more growth-oriented professional identity. The training facilitated a movement away from fixed self-images, fostering confidence and a stronger sense of professional agency. “Am I the right person to guide someone else? I kept asking myself that. But through the program, I began to believe I could be.” [*Participant A, C, background in pedagogy and management,* women, aged 34 and 31]. This cognitive and emotional reorientation represents a critical element of transformative learning, aligning with Mezirow’s emphasis on the reassessment of assumptions and the reconstruction of meaning perspectives. The transformative process identified here is reflected in how participants expanded and revised their existing systems of knowledge related to CGC.

Theme 2: Emotional and psychological barriers to learning

Emotional vulnerability was a recurring theme. Participants reported struggling with self-doubt, frustration, and personal insecurities – often heightened by the reflective and relational nature of the training process. “It was hard accepting that I can’t help everyone. Sometimes I felt like a failure.” [*Participant I, background in international relations,* woman, aged 40]. Participants reported that these psychological barriers initially posed challenges to engagement and learning but ultimately acted as catalysts for deeper self-understanding. In some cases, unresolved personal issues surfaced, demonstrating how career counsellor training may inadvertently take on a therapeutic dimension. Knowing one’s limitations – emotionally and professionally – became a necessary part of growth. The opportunity to voice these concerns within a safe group context was cited as essential for overcoming them. This theme reinforces the notion that emotional processing is central to the transformative learning process. Participants learned not how to manage their emotions but also how to use emotional insight to better support others.

Theme 3: The power of social learning and group cohesion

Group learning emerged as one of the most powerful dimensions of the program. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of being part of a supportive learning community. “We learned a lot from the trainer, but even more from each other. It felt like a safe space.” [*Participant B, background in psychology,* man, aged 38]. The group dynamic allowed participants to test ideas, receive validation, and reflect on feedback. This co-constructed learning environment fostered openness, empathy and trust. Participants reported that group reflections were especially valuable tools for processing challenging experiences and for exploring new professional roles within the field of CGC. Social learning thus played a dual role: it offered practical support and validation while simultaneously serving as a mirror for participants’ evolving self-perceptions. These findings underscore TLT’s emphasis on dialogue and social interaction as mechanisms for fostering transformation.

Table 1
Master Table of Themes and Subthemes for the Whole Group

Theme	Sub-themes	Description	Participants' IDs
1. Self-perception and competence recognition	- From deficit thinking to strength-based awareness - Uncovering and naming informally acquired competencies - Reframing professional identity	Participants discovered hidden competencies and shifted from self-doubt to confidence through reflection and peer support	A, B, C, D, F, H, J
2. Emotional and psychological barriers to learning CGC	- Self-doubt and fear of inadequacy - Emotional vulnerability and unresolved issues - Difficulties in setting boundaries	Emotional struggles surfaced during the training, but they ultimately contributed to deeper insight and growth	A, C, E, F, G, I, J
3. Social learning and group cohesion	- Peer support and validation - Safe space for dialogue - Group reflection	The group process served as a key catalyst for transformation, offering support, feedback, and a sense of belonging	A, B, D, E, F, G, H, I, J
4. Developing proactive career engagement	- Increased self-efficacy and ownership - Encouraging agency in clients	Participants reported a mindset shift to actively shaping their practical engagement in CGS	A, B, D, F, H, I
5. Dual transformation of the counsellor	- Reflection on practice - Setting professional boundaries - Redefining the counsellor role	Counsellors experienced parallel transformation, enhancing their ability to support others while becoming aware of their own needs	A, B, C, G, J

Theme 4: Developing proactive career engagement

A notable outcome of the training program was developing a proactive career engagement. Initially, some participants approached the training process passively, focusing on acquiring knowledge without thinking of broader application. Through the course of the program, participants increasingly embraced a proactive stance toward their learning. "I came to this program just because I had some free time and wanted to do something useful in life, as I am currently unemployed. But, I realized that no learning will happen unless I take a proactive role and start to engage in building new career opportunities for myself." [*Participant E, background in social sciences,* man, aged 30]. This shift from reactive to proactive engagement signifies an important dimension of transformative learning. Participants began to perceive themselves as active agents capable of shaping their practice, setting boundaries, and making intentional career decisions. This empowerment was also reflected in how they approached clients, encouraging them to take ownership of their career development, which was often mentioned when they reflected on the practical part of the program.

Theme 5: The dual transformation of career counsellors

As read from participants' accounts, the training program transformed their self-perception and it also affected their understanding of the counsellor role. Participants reported increased self-awareness regarding their responsibilities, boundaries, and scope of actions. "The most powerful moments were during reflection sessions. That's when I really started questioning myself – not just what I do, but how I do it and why." [*Participant B, background in psychology,* man, aged 38]. Through managing emotional labour, participating in group dynamics and refining their professional identities, participants experienced an internal shift that mirrored the transformative processes they were meant to facilitate in clients. This "dual transformation"

suggests that effective counsellor training must focus not only on skills and knowledge, but also on identity work and reflective capacity.

6 Conclusion

This small-scale qualitative research provided insights into how a training program informed by TLT can lead to the development of CGC practitioners. Research results highlight the potential of TLT to foster reflective practice, ethical awareness and a developing sense of professional identity. Analysis revealed that trainees experienced transformative learning across three key processes in which they;

- expanded and revised their existing systems of knowledge related to CGC
- engaged with new meaning schemes associated with CGC and attempted to internalize them
- recognized the limitations of their previous frames of reference and reported a conscious effort to reorganize and transform them in the context of CGC.

The findings suggest that the training programs created conditions that facilitated transformative learning, which participants described as both professionally and personally empowering. Data show that TLT provides a valuable theoretical and practical framework for training career counsellors, especially in such contexts where trainees come with already formed professional identities. By focusing on meaning-making and personal development, the approach encourages deep, reflective learning that enhances counsellors' capacity to support others in career learning.

In conclusion, this research supports the relevance of TLT as a guiding framework for designing training programs in CGC. The participants' narratives reveal clear evidence of perspective transformation, characterized by:

- critical self-reflection and questioning of assumptions
- emotional processing and the surfacing of psychological barriers
- recognition of personal competencies and self-efficacy that can be applied in CGC practice
- social validation through group learning and peer support
- development of agency in CGC practical roles

These transformations were not induced by crisis, but by thoughtfully designed learning encounters, experiential activities and guided reflection, as part of two training programs. Programs posed "disorienting dilemmas" through exposure to diverse perspectives, structured reflection and engagement in authentic professional dilemmas highlighting the effectiveness of applying theory-informed, experiential methods in adult education. Based on the findings from this research involving participants trained in three distinct CGC programs, it can be concluded that acquiring CGC competencies among individuals who have already established professional identities in other fields must be a transformative process, enabling an expansion of their professional self-image. Feelings of insecurity regarding one's competencies and uncertainty about one's role as a counsellor are often present in the interviews. Therefore, the initial stage in

developing CGC competencies should involve perspective transformation, as outlined in the principles of TLT.

The aim of this research was to explore the potential of TLT to serve as a framework for career counsellor training. Currently, these programs in BiH are offered as a non-formal way of acquiring practical competences to persons of various professional backgrounds. It was observed that all participants had experienced some form of transformation which is, according to the conducted interviews, related to their readiness to learn about CGC as a new field of practice for them. However, the present research was not specifically focused on differentiating how the participants' diverse professional backgrounds influenced both the nature and depth of the transformative learning process. Access to the research sample was already limited by the offer of training programs for CGC practitioners and their frequency. Future studies employing larger and more diverse samples could provide a broader understanding of the patterns observed here.

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Biographical notes

Dr. Amina Isanović Hadžiomerović is a Professor at the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo (UNSA), Bosnia and Herzegovina. She teaches Adult Education, Career Guidance, Evaluation in Education and Research Methods.