

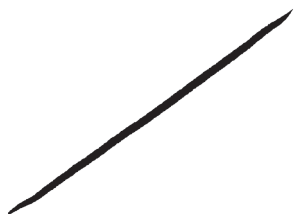
DESIGNING A LIFE ON STAGE: **APPLYING CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY** TO ACTORS' VOCATIONAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract: The professional trajectories of actors are marked by unpredictability and instability, unfolding within work contexts that often lack professional and financial security. This study explores the career development of actors through the narrative lens of Career Construction Theory (CCT) (Savickas, 2005, 2009), a framework particularly suited to understanding career paths in a constantly changing society. The research investigates the life themes that underlie and influence the career choices of actors and their professional evolution.

Adopting a qualitative design, the study employed content analysis of eight case studies, each consisting of two semi-structured interviews conducted using the Autobiographical Workbook: My Career Story (MCS) (Savickas and Hartung, 2012). The group of participants included eight actors representing different stages of professional development – undergraduate students, master’s students, and established professionals.

The thematic analysis revealed two overarching life themes: (1) the unique journey through which actors construct their career choice, encompassing internal and external influences, such as mentors, intrinsic motivation, and the sense of calling; and (2) the trajectory of career development, which reflects adaptability, perseverance, and identity reinvention across shifting artistic and economic contexts. Findings highlight the importance of constructing a coherent and meaningful personal narrative that provides actors with a sense of direction, purpose, and resilience amid uncertainty. By enabling individuals to author and reinterpret their professional stories, CCT offers a powerful framework for understanding how actors find continuity and agency within nonlinear, protean careers. The study contributes to extending the applicability of Career Construction Theory to the performing arts – an occupational domain that remains underexplored in career development research.

Keywords: career construction theory, actors, narrative approach, professional identity, adaptability, agency, life design.

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Introduction

Career construction approach – from stories to life design

Savickas' Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 2005, 2013) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals actively construct their careers through meaning-making and narrative processes. CCT conceptualizes career not as a fixed trajectory but as an ongoing narrative that individuals author through their interactions with social, cultural, and occupational contexts (Savickas, 2013). It proposes that people construct their careers by imposing meaning and coherence on their experiences, using stories

to integrate past experiences, present roles, and future aspirations into a unified sense of self (Savickas, 2011). Thus, rather than identifying objective vocational “fit,” CCT focuses on subjective meaning and personal agency (Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

Career Construction Theory (CCT) is especially well suited for analysing and understanding the careers of actors in today’s cultural and economic context, characterized by instability, project-based employment, and blurred boundaries between personal identity and professional life. Acting careers are inherently nonlinear, shaped by intermittent work, competition, and continuous adaptation to shifting artistic and technological environments. CCT’s focus on narrative meaning-making, adaptability, and self-construction provides a framework that captures this complexity more effectively than traditional trait-matching models (Savickas, 2013).

Central to this process of career construction is *career adaptability*, defined as the psychosocial resources that enable individuals to cope with current and anticipated vocational tasks, transitions, and traumas. Adaptability is expressed through four dimensions – *concern*, *control*, *curiosity*, and *confidence* – which together facilitate proactive engagement with career challenges and change (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012; Savickas, 2013).

Career concern reflects an individual’s orientation toward and preparation for the future (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). In the context of acting, this involves cultivating an ongoing awareness of one’s professional trajectory, anticipating industry shifts, and envisioning possible career directions. For example, actors demonstrate concern by setting long-term artistic or educational goals, such as pursuing advanced training, developing complementary skills (e.g., directing or screenwriting), or planning transitions between stage, film, and digital media. Concern functions as a narrative anchor—actors imagine their future selves and construct purposeful continuity across episodic employment (Hartung, 2015).

Career control refers to the capacity to take ownership of one’s vocational decisions and to enact agency in shaping career paths (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). In an industry characterized by instability, actors exhibit control through self-directed initiatives such as creating independent productions, managing personal branding, or establishing professional networks. Exercising control also involves making deliberate choices about auditions, collaborations, and representation, asserting one’s professional identity amidst external judgment and uncertainty. In narrative terms, control corresponds to the theme of *authorship*—the sense of being the protagonist rather than a passive character in one’s career story (Savickas, 2013).

Career curiosity captures the willingness to explore new roles, contexts, and experiences to learn about the self and the world of work (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Actors express curiosity through experimentation—auditioning for unfamiliar genres, engaging in cross-disciplinary collaboration, or working in different cultural and linguistic settings. Curiosity also manifests in openness to feedback, continuous learning, and the pursuit of creative growth. This dimension sustains adaptability by enabling actors to transform career disruptions into opportunities for exploration and reinvention, echoing the life themes of *creativity* and *transformation* identified in narrative analyses (Savickas, 2011).

Career confidence represents the belief in one's ability to solve problems, overcome barriers, and perform effectively in the vocational domain (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). For actors, confidence is essential to navigating rejection, performance anxiety, and the evaluative nature of auditions. It encompasses both technical self-efficacy—the assurance in one's artistic competence, and psychological resilience—the capacity to persist despite uncertainty (Hartung and Santilli, 2018). Confidence allows actors to maintain motivation across fluctuating employment cycles and to continue asserting their artistic identity even when external validation is limited.

Collectively, these four adaptability dimensions interact dynamically within the actor's narrative. Concern provides temporal direction; control anchors agency; curiosity fuels growth and exploration; and confidence sustains resilience (Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

Narrative identity is another core component of the theory. Savickas draws upon McAdams' (1993) model of narrative identity to describe how people construct coherence across their life stories (McAdams, 1993; Savickas, 2013). Through telling and retelling these stories, individuals articulate their *life themes*, which express enduring motives, values, and purposes that give personal significance to work and career choices (Savickas, 2011; Savickas, 2013). In this sense, work becomes a medium through which individuals realize their life themes and enact their self-concept in society (Savickas, 2005). The process of eliciting and interpreting such themes is operationalized through narrative assessment tools such as the *Career Construction Interview* (CCI; Savickas, 2011) and *My Career Story* (MCS; Savickas and Hartung, 2012; Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 2005, 2013) and the Life Design paradigm (Savickas et al., 2009) share a common epistemological foundation in constructivist and social constructionist thought, viewing careers as stories individuals create to give meaning and continuity to their lives (Savickas et al., 2009). The *narrative approach* serves as the methodological bridge between the two: it operationalizes the theoretical premise that people construct identity

and direction through storytelling (Savickas, 2013). Within CCT, the narrative is not simply a means of describing experience but a *process of construction* through which individuals integrate past, present, and future into a coherent life portrait (Savickas, 2011; Savickas, 2013). The Life Design model extends this perspective into practice by framing career counselling as a collaborative process of co-authoring life narratives in response to change and uncertainty (Savickas et al., 2009). Whereas traditional models emphasize trait-factor fit, both CCT and Life Design emphasize adaptability, purpose, and agency—the individual’s capacity to design and redesign their life trajectory across evolving contexts (Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

In this integrated framework, *career construction* provides the conceptual model for understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences, while *life design* translates these ideas into dialogical, future-oriented interventions that empower individuals to act on those meanings (Savickas, 2013; Hartung, 2015). Narrative tools such as the **Career Construction Interview (CCI)** and **My Career Story (MCS)** embody this synthesis by eliciting the stories, metaphors, and life themes that articulate identity and guide self-directed action (Hartung and Santilli, 2018). The CCT–Life Design integration thus positions career development as both a narrative and design process: people first *story* their experience to understand who they have been, and then *design* their future selves in alignment with evolving life projects (Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

Life themes in actors’ careers stories

Kleynhans, Nel and Maree (2024) adopt a **qualitative multiple case-study** design to explore how performing artists construct their careers using a career construction/life-design lens. They integrate multiple narrative sources, including **Career Interest Profiles (CIP), Career Construction Interviews (CCI), life-design counselling exercises, and publicly available biographical data**. Through thematic analysis, the authors distil two overarching thematic domains: (1) the **unique journey** of performing artists as they narrate their careers focusing on internal factors, and (2) the **trajectory of career development**, which emphasizes rather external factors shaping success, failure, and the “survival skill set.”

The first domain captures how performing artists narrate their *personal, idiosyncratic paths*, emphasizing how their stories are shaped by meanings, identity, and metaphorical sense-making. Under this domain, Kleynhans et al. (2024) demarcate several sub-themes or narrative strands that constitute the texture of their journeys:

1. Calling/Vocation

- Many artists describe their profession as something they “could not not do”—as an inner compulsion or life calling, rather than a mere job choice.
- The narrative of “becoming”—discovering or coming to accept the identity of artist—is central.

2. Narrative of Struggle, Rejection, and Persistence

- Their stories include episodes of rejection, failure, or scarcity, often framed as pivotal turning points. These painful events are narrated not simply as setbacks but as crucibles for growth.
- The persistence (or resilience) to carry on in spite of adversity is a recurrent motif.

3. Identity Integration/Self-as-Artist

- Artistic identity is integrated with personal identity: performers tend to narrate that their *self* and their *work* are inseparable.
- This often involves narrative coherence: linking early life, preferred roles, metaphors, and future aspirations into a single thread.

4. Metaphors and Narrative Devices

- Kleynhans et al. (2024) note that participants often deploy metaphors (journey, battle, transformation) and symbolic stories (favourite novels/films, role models) in making sense of their career path.
- These narrative devices function as organizing principles that give their journeys unity and meaning.

Thus, the “unique journey” theme is not merely descriptive (i.e. “every artist is different”), but is analytically rich: it refers to how performers *compose* their own careers via narrative, identity work, meaning-making, turning points, metaphorical framing, and integrative coherence.

The second domain shifts focus slightly outward: it attends to how artists describe *developmental phases, transitions, strategies, and survival mechanisms* that mark their professional trajectories. Under this umbrella, Kleynhans et al. (2024) isolate several sub-themes or life themes more oriented toward action, adaptation, and career management:

1. Factors Influencing Perceived Success or Failure

- Artists reflect on *external enablers and constraints* (access to opportunities, institutional prestige, social networks, resources, luck) as shaping whether they see themselves as successful or not.

- Internal qualities (talent, determination, adaptability) are also weighed—frequently in dialectic with external conditions.
- 2. “Survival Skill Set”**
- A core subtheme is the ensemble of strategies, skills, and competencies artists deem necessary to *survive* in a competitive, unstable industry. Kleynhans et al. (2024) call this the “survival skill set.” These include: entrepreneurship, self-promotion, networking, flexibility (temporal and geographic), portfolio career strategies, marketing, adaptability to multiple roles, and continual self-rebranding.
- 3. Career Transitions and Turning Points**
- The trajectory narrative includes key transitions (e.g. moving from student to professional, switching geographies or artistic domains, or evolving from performer to teacher/mentor).
 - These junctures are often narrated as crises or growth moments that necessitated adaptation or re-storying.
- 4. Adaptive Flexibility/Protean Logic**
- The authors emphasize that performing artists’ careers are often *protean* (self-directed, values-driven, adaptive). Their life stories include episodes of reorientation, redefinition, and pivoting in response to changing conditions.
 - The capacity to reinvent oneself and to respond to instability is a recurring subtheme.
- 5. Narrative of Continuity Across Phases**
- Even as artists shift roles, diversify portfolios, or recalibrate goals, their narratives often seek *continuity*—linking earlier visions, themes, or metaphors to later phases, thus preserving a sense of identity across change.
 - In other words, the trajectory is not made of disconnected episodes but narrated as an evolving story.

Bahia, Janeiro and Duarte (2007) conducted a qualitative, autobiographical study with 28 student actors in Portugal, asking them to write narratives about personal and contextual factors they considered decisive in shaping their decision to pursue an acting career, and in implementing it.

Through qualitative content analysis, the authors identified a set of recurring personal attributes, educational / opportunity factors, and barrier-mitigating strategies that participants positioned as central to their career trajectory.

Some consistently narrated personal features included:

1. Autonomy/Self-agency—Many writers emphasized the desire to make independent choices, to control their path rather than accept externally imposed options.

2. Determination/Perseverance—A strong theme was persistence in face of obstacles—continuing despite rejection, uncertainty, or lack of immediate success.

3. Creativity/Imagination—The intrinsic pull of artistic creation is foregrounded; participants often named creative instinct or expressive capacity as a motivating core.

4. Self-determination/internal locus—Many emphasized that internal conviction (rather than external validation) propelled them forward.

Beyond personal traits, participants recognized contextual enablers and challenges:

- **Educational opportunities/training:** Access to acting schools, workshops, mentorship, and performance opportunities were seen as crucial stepping stones.
- **Cultural/social support:** Family encouragement, peer networks, and cultural milieus receptive to the arts were cited as facilitators.
- **Cultural and social barriers:** Participants acknowledged social opinions, cultural constraints, stigma (e.g. that acting is risky or unstable), and economic insecurity as obstacles to be negotiated.
- **Balancing realism and aspiration:** Some narratives reflect tension in reconciling lofty artistic aims with pragmatic constraints (income, stability).

The study also surfaced the strategies participants used to translate aspirations into action:

- **Incremental steps/stage-wise progression:** Many described moving gradually from small roles, local theatre, student productions, to larger endeavours—building experience and reputation.
- **Supplementary work/dual paths:** Because of the economic precariousness of acting, participants often engaged in side jobs or parallel income-generating work to sustain themselves.
- **Persistence despite rejection:** Authors recounted how recurrent rejections, auditions not won, and delayed success were woven into their narrative as tests to be overcome.

- **Self-promotion, networking, seizing opportunity:** They narrated actively seeking roles, making connections, auditioning widely, and being alert to chance openings.

Research on actors' career development reveals a strong convergence around narrative and meaning-making processes, as captured through the lens of Savickas' Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 2005, 2013). Both Bahia, Janeiro and Duarte (2007) and Kleynhans, Nel and Maree (2024) show that actors construct their careers as evolving stories of identity, struggle, and adaptation. When interpreted through the CCT framework, their findings illuminate a coherent set of **life themes** that organize actors' experiences of work and self.

When synthesized, the two studies reveal six interrelated **life themes** that structure actors' career stories. The first is calling or authenticity—the sense of “I must perform,” which anchors identity in self-expression and purpose. The second, resilience through adversity, transforms struggle and rejection into growth, echoing CCT's notion of adaptive mastery. The third, agency and autonomy, reflects self-authorship and resistance to external control. The fourth, creativity and transformation, situates acting as a process of continual self-reinvention. The fifth, balancing art and survival, captures the tension between artistic idealism and economic reality, highlighting adaptability as both a psychological and practical resource. Finally, connection and contribution express the actors' desire to impact audiences and society through their work, linking individual narratives to broader systems of meaning.

These themes align closely with the four dimensions of career adaptability—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—proposed by Savickas (2013). The “calling” and “connection” themes reflect concern and purpose; “agency” aligns with control; “creativity” corresponds to curiosity; and “resilience” reflects confidence. The balancing theme integrates contextual adaptation, emphasizing how artists sustain coherence amid instability.

Taken together, Bahia et al. (2007) and Kleynhans et al. (2024) demonstrate that actors construct their careers as dynamic life stories, organized around enduring life themes that bridge identity, adaptability, and meaning. These findings reinforce the value of narrative instruments such as the *Career Construction Interview* and *My Career Story* in eliciting and interpreting the metaphors, turning points, and identity motifs through which performers author their vocational lives.

Research methodology

In the present study we intended to explore the life themes that appear in the career stories of Romanian actors, at different stages in their professional development.

Instruments

The study takes a qualitative research approach, based on content analysis of eight case studies and the use of semi-structured interviews based on the *Autobiographical Workbook for Professional Success: My Career Story* (MCS) (Savickas and Hartung, 2012), translated and adapted by the career counsellors team at the Career Counselling Centre at Titu Maiorescu University.

The *Autobiographical Workbook for Professional Success: My Career Story* (MCS) (Savickas and Hartung, 2012) is a narrative-based self-reflection tool developed within the framework of **Career Construction Theory (CCT)** and the broader **Life Design paradigm**. It is designed to help individuals author coherent and meaningful career narratives by integrating their experiences, values, and aspirations into a self-directed life story. The MCS operationalizes the central CCT principle that *career is a story people tell about themselves*—a dynamic narrative that links identity with purposeful action. Structurally, the workbook invites users to respond to a sequence of autobiographical prompts and reflective exercises concerning life roles, early memories, admired figures, central values, and preferred activities. Through this process, individuals construct a written “career story” that highlights the **life themes** and adaptive resources guiding their vocational behaviour.

The MCS is conceptually and methodologically connected to the **Career Construction Interview (CCI)** (Savickas, 2011). Both instruments aim to reveal the individual’s core motives, recurring patterns, and sources of meaning, thus providing a foundation for collaborative interpretation and narrative re-authoring. The MCS can be used independently or as a preparatory or complementary exercise to the CCI, enhancing client self-awareness and facilitating the counsellor’s understanding of the person’s story.

Empirical studies have supported the **construct validity** and **practical efficacy** of the MCS. Research by Hartung, Santilli, and Savickas (2019) demonstrated that engagement with the workbook fosters narrative coherence, self-concept clarity, and career adaptability—particularly increases in the four adaptability dimensions (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence). Cross-cultural applications have confirmed the instrument’s **flexibility and validity** in diverse educational, occupational, and cultural contexts, including students, career changers, and creative professionals (Di Fabio and Maree, 2016; Santilli et

al., 2017). The MCS is thus recognized as a reliable tool for promoting reflective career construction and life design interventions.

For **actors**, the MCS offers distinct advantages. Given the fragmented, episodic, and identity-centered nature of artistic careers, the workbook provides a structured yet expressive means of articulating coherence across fluctuating experiences. It enables actors to explore the *life themes* underlying their creative choices—such as calling, resilience, self-expression, and social contribution—and to reinterpret career transitions as meaningful narrative chapters rather than disruptions. Moreover, by engaging with the MCS, actors can identify how their personal stories intersect with professional aspirations, strengthen adaptability resources, and design intentional strategies for future growth.

In both research and counselling contexts, the MCS facilitates the integration of artistic identity, vocational purpose, and adaptive self-reflection, making it a powerful instrument for supporting actors in constructing sustainable and meaningful career narratives.

Participants

The group of participants consisted of 8 actors, 4 actresses and 4 actors: 4 students in the third year at the Faculty of Acting (UNATC), aged 21 and 22; 2 second-year master's students, bachelor's degree in acting (UNATC), aged 23 and 25 years; 1 actress graduated from UNATC, 43 years old and 1 actor graduated from UNATC, 51 years old.

For each of the eight participants, two semi-structured interviews were conducted, carried out face to face with each participant. The duration of each interview was between one hour and one hour and thirty minutes.

The time span between the two interviews with each participant was maximum two weeks. These were accompanied by direct observation and audio recordings, according to the Research Participation Agreement (informed consent to participation), signed by each participant. Participation was voluntary, ensuring the anonymity of the participants and the right to withdraw from the research. The research thus complied with the fundamental ethical principles (APA, 2017), the interviews being anonymized, and a code was assigned to each participant, as follows: S1–S4 – for students, M1–M2 – for master's students, P1–P2 – for professionals.

Procedure

Each participant attended two semi-structured interviews conducted on the basis of the *Autobiographical Workbook for Professional Success: My Career Story* (MCS) (Savickas and Hartung, 2012).

The first interview of each participant included Part I—"Tell your story", and the second interview included Part II—"Listen to your story", which led to the outlining of the career story of each research participant identity—a summary of the portrait of his life (based on the stories told by the participant in the first meeting)—and, at the same time, Part III—"Live your story", highlighting the plan that the participant will put into action to concretely live their story.

The information obtained in the interviews was subjected to content analysis in order to debate the central life themes that influence the professional path of the actors.

The content analysis of the 16 career interviews conducted with the 8 participants in the study revealed those life themes that highlight decisive factors for career choice, which are also found in the literature.

Results

The two life themes identified in the study were: the unique journey that actors go through in the construction of their career choice, and the trajectory of career development. The two themes are supported by the literature through the research carried out by Kleynhans, Nel and Maree (2024).

During the analysis, the exemplification of these decisive factors in choosing an acting career was used through quotes from interviews, related to the identified life themes.

The theme of the actors' unique journey in making a career choice encompasses (1) external factors, and (2) internal influencing factors in building that choice.

The external factors were represented, as in the literature, by the *significant people in the actors' lives*, who had an impact on the choice of the professional path (Kleynhans, Nel and Maree, 2024).

The interview material collected from the participants was organized around the six life themes identified across *Bahia et al. (2007)* and *Kleynhans et al. (2024)*. Participants consistently referred to **significant people**—family members, mentors, teachers, or admired professionals—who influenced their entry into the artistic field. These relationships often acted as catalysts for the *calling* theme, shaping early awareness of artistic identity and providing emotional validation for pursuing a non-traditional career. Mentors and role models were also linked to the *connection and contribution* theme, as they embodied the possibility of using art to influence and engage others.

These were found in excerpts from interviews, such as:

I was attracted by how he played stupidity, how he did physical things. I was most attracted by that process, the lightness with which he joked, with which he made jokes, we were amused by what it didn't work out for them at the filming (S3 about Toni Ionescu, playing Mărlanu in the series *Trăsniți în NATO*, interview 1),

Mihai Bendeac was a star, he was a man on television. It seemed that he was not a real man, he was on TV! It seemed that I would never meet him. We know each other now. I was fascinated by what he did, that is, the fact that he did everything himself, he wrote them, he played them, and he did it well! Essentially, he was a man who worked hard and did what he did very well! (M1, interview 1),

I loved my first friend at first, but I felt intimidated by her qualities. She was already an actress (M2, interview 1).

Internal factors emerged as powerful narrative drivers. Many participants articulated a *feeling of being an artist*—describing the artistic vocation as an inherent part of the self rather than an externally chosen occupation. This aligns directly with the **theme of calling or authenticity**, in which the artistic career is perceived as something that “chose” the individual. The emphasis on innate *artistic ability* and early *interests* further reinforces identity-based motivation, consistent with Savickas' (2013) view of career as self-expression through work roles.

They can be found in the following statements during the interviews:

The feeling of being an artist:

The job chooses you (S2, interview 1),

Becoming is done by itself (P1., interview 2).

Artistic skills:

I consider myself to be very hardworking and not talented (S 1, interview 2),

This is a question, which I kept asking myself... if I'm talented or I've worked hard enough that I've beaten talent. I don't know yet, but something in me, still growing, tells me that I have talent. I mean, yes, clearly the work has brought me to this point, but I think there is an inclination for it! (M1, interview 1).

Artistic interests:

I thought about acting from the age of 3-4. I was talking non-stop, I wanted to be a speaker (S 1, interview 1),

(..) At least for me, I felt at the age of 5 that I was different, my concerns were different... I knew I was different because I understood the humor of some skits that were playing on TV. I was playing the skit Cucumber performed by Florin Piersic, in all voices, and the others were playing football (P1., interview 1).

The **theme of social contribution** is also evident in participants' expressed *desire to intervene at a social level* (Bahia et al., 2007). Here, acting becomes not only a means of personal expression but a channel for *social dialogue and transformation*. This expands the "connection" theme beyond interpersonal relationships to include a moral or civic dimension—art as a vehicle for empathy, critique, and collective meaning-making.

Social intervention:

I will be the happiest and most successful when I can be free and not bored, in places where people have both heart and brain, so that I can bring my unique contribution to the world through the art I make, produce (S1, interview 2),

I want to save souls, I want to bring beauty, and I want to inspire people with courage! People need to go through a kind of purgatory as a kind of time of cleansing, of purification, to reach the past and then for other people to come from there", (...) to become the queen of human souls, to be able to carry out what my grandfather started, to bring beauty into the world and to save as many lives as possible! (S4, interview 2).

The recurrent mention of *freedom of expression* and *career control* corresponds to the **agency and autonomy** theme. Participants framed the performing arts as one of the few spaces that permit authenticity and self-direction, reinforcing the protean orientation (Hall, 2004) characteristic of artistic careers. This narrative of autonomy is often balanced by the recognition of *career curiosity* and the *need for continuous training and perseverance*, reflecting the **themes of transformation and resilience**. Actors portrayed their professional journey as a process of perpetual learning and reinvention, consistent with the adaptability resources of *curiosity* and *confidence* in Savickas' model (2013).

Freedom of expression:

I love being in places that make you feel free... to avoid places where life

can be ruined by the constraints of others (S1, interview 2),
 I consider myself lucky, I do what I want, I earned this freedom by working (P1, interview 2),
 I like to be in places where I am useful, environments where people have humor, self-irony, where there is freedom to create and that let you express yourself, encourage your creation” (P1, interview 2),
 I want to continue, I want to act, I want to work on as many projects as possible, and I don’t know exactly how to take it... I think, should I focus on other things? Now I’m considering doing the directing and film faculty, as a second back-up faculty (S1, interview 1),
 I’m currently thinking about trying theater directing, also teaching theater, acting (S3 interview 1),
 I am at a point where I want to explore much more the area of physical theater, to do more movement shows than acting” (S2, interview 1),
 The point where I am in my career is very early. I sometimes feel that it is not clear to me if it is what I really want to do. I find myself in acting, but I also think about directing (S4, interview 1),
 I want to become a university professor, I know for sure, that’s why I also give my doctorate; I also want to play a lot in films (M2, interview 2).

At the level of career control, the need for training and perseverance were found during the interviews:

(...) to grind it out, to pull as hard as I can... to do the best I can, I set myself extra rules! If it goes wrong, let me get sacked! (...) Expect the best, prepare for the worst! Better to face hardships than to back down. Don’t hope and don’t be afraid! (S1, interview 2),
 I am a fighter, ambitious person (S3, interview 2),
 (...) in these places I want to give my best, to learn, to reach my potential, to be a good person, a person on whom the world can rely. (M1, interview 2),
 Go ahead, because everything will settle down, don’t get stuck! (M2, interview 2),
 I consider myself a demanding person first with myself, then with others, a very curious person. There is so much to know, and we should always drive ourselves towards satisfying this desire for knowledge. I’m a very perfectionist, I like everything to turn out very well, but that’s also a flaw sometimes (S2, interview 2),
 To achieve my goals, I need continuous work, self development, to

continue studying acting (...) I think I still need a lot of reading” (M2, interview 2),
 (...) to be perseverant, not to give up (S1, interview 2),
 I am aware of the fact that I will never stop learning (M1, interview 2).

Several participants described *creating their own opportunities*—founding collectives, producing independent work, or expanding into related creative domains—as expressions of agency and innovation. These stories exemplify the **balancing art and survival** theme, in which adaptability and entrepreneurship serve as mechanisms for sustaining one’s calling under precarious economic conditions.

Creating your own opportunities:

I’m at a point where I’ve already gone through some experiences, I’ve been able to work in almost all the professional fields in which I can work (S1, interview 1),

I’m currently working on a project with a few classmates together in a group to get experience with each other. If we managed to coagulate this group, it would open up many more opportunities for us (S3, interview 1),

I played everything I could play in college, everything, everything. I went to departments that were not related to me, I was there. And I think this helped me because I met very quickly, a lot of working styles, because everyone works differently and that helps you (M1, interview 2).

Continuous reinvention of the self:

Don’t forget to look within yourself, in others, in everything, to look for yourself, to discover what helps you in life, what makes you rich, as well as in situations. Don’t give up, don’t flatten yourself, never be enough. We have to search all the time, to become better, to be more sympathetic, to do what we do better! (P2, interview 1).

Finally, reflections on *self-confidence* and *courage to express oneself* illuminate the **resilience through adversity** theme and the adaptability dimension of *confidence*. Particularly among younger participants, the recognition of self-doubt coexisted with a desire to strengthen self-efficacy—an essential component of narrative identity development in early career stages.

I don’t want to turn back from the road or be afraid of various things.
 That’s what annoys me the most about me— fear! (...) I want to do

what I do well, to do it without thinking about it a thousand times beforehand, to trust myself in the face of any requests, including my job. I will be happiest and most successful when I have confidence, when I am fearless (P2, interview 2),

(...) to be able to get where I want to be professionally, without stumbling (I judge myself, internalize the judgments of others, which drags me down) (M2, interview 2),

I would like to have more confidence in myself (S3, interview 1),

I think I would need more professional confidence in myself to believe that I can do this, to believe that I will get that award (M2, interview 2),

In the meantime, I will become a person who will have influence through words, actions and probably also financially. For this, I would need confidence in myself and in my strength, financial support from my family, courage and God (S4, interview 2).

Autonomy:

I like to be in places where you can do and want to do something with your life (S4, interview 2),

I consider myself lucky, I do what I want, I earned this freedom by working (P1, interview 2),

I love being in places that make you feel free... avoid places where life can be ruined by the constraints of others (S1, interview 2),

I want to play a lot, but in projects I believe in! (M2, interview 2).

Determination:

There are sixty-five actors in a year, only seven on average become known. I wouldn't want to reorient in my career; I want to be one of the seven actors in a class who really manage to stand out! (S1, interview 1),

I entered college from the third try, I didn't enter from the first (...) I had two years of introspection and to choose in the end what I am going to do with my life. And when I entered college, I knew why I was entering, what I wanted to do, what is the path I want to take! (M1, interview 1),

I gave up geography to stay in acting. (S3, interview 1),

I will be happiest and most successful when I will be able to give 100% of myself in everything I do (both with friends and professionally), to give my best and most beautiful! (...) I am a person who becomes a good professional, who most likely will not stop working, who is going to exploit his talent to the end. (M2, interview 2),

So, in these places I want to fulfill my dream, to be able to complete

a path that I have already started, that of acting, to struggle until I succeed! (S2, interview 2),

I want to realize myself professionally, to be first and foremost a successful actress. Maybe my biggest dream now and that I see as fulfilling would be to win an award at Cannes for Best Actress. That's what I would like very much! (M2, interview 2),

(...) to become a better actor, the best in Romania, to try my luck abroad, to get there being very good, to get the statuette with the Oscar and then come back to Romania (...) to become the best at what I do, as good as it gets! (M2, interview 2).

Across participants, personality characteristics such as **openness to experience** and **agreeableness** identified previously in literature (Nettle, 2006) were evident in their receptivity to new experiences, collaboration, and emotional engagement—traits that support curiosity, connection, and creative exploration. These dispositional factors provide the psychological substrate upon which life themes are enacted, reinforcing the interplay between enduring traits and narrative meaning-making in career construction.

Thus, we find the following excerpts from the interviews:

Openness to experience:

I am a person who seeks things to happen to him, throws himself into all kinds of things and things happen to him (S1, interview 2),

(...) I want to test different typologies and worlds, I like to get out of my comfort zone (S1, interview 1),

So, in these places I would take advantage of everything that surrounds me, I would learn, I would enjoy, I would laugh, I would create, I would be like a sponge (M2, interview 2),

I consider myself a person available to love and, not only, to find all kinds of options regarding many situations I encounter (S2, interview 2),

I really enjoy working with directors from different areas of theatre, with different types of approaches, because I feel like I'm learning something new every time (P2, interview 1).

All projects are useful, even the weakest ones, so that you have something to learn from. I couldn't do the same thing over and over again, I would stop. It is precisely this acting job that helps you do anything (M1, interview 2).

Agreeableness:

I don't care what others say about me, but I like people's company, and I would like them to have a good opinion of me to make it easier for me. (S1, interview 2),

I like to work in environments where you enjoy being in their midst, environments where you are recognized and don't need to prove who you are every time. (P1, interview 2),

I'll be happiest and most successful when... I will have the endorsement of others to trust myself or maybe when I will no longer look for it and I will no longer need it (as an actor it would be easier for me to have the endorsement of others" (P2, interview 2),

I like to be in places where I am appreciated, (...) where I feel loved and where I love in turn (M1, interview 2).

Conclusions

In planning and sustaining a successful career within the fluid and unpredictable landscape of the modern world of work, **narrative methods** offer individuals the clarity and confidence necessary for continuous career building. As Savickas (2011) argued, individuals achieve professional success by constructing a coherent story about themselves—articulating who they are, what they enjoy doing, and how work enables them to preserve and express their identities (Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

Grounded in this perspective, the present study examined career story construction through the three central pillars of **Career Construction Theory (CCT)**—*narrative identity*, *adaptability*, and *agency*—and their integration within the **Life Design paradigm** (Savickas, 2005, 2009), before applying these frameworks to research on careers in the performing arts.

Life Design has been described as a **preventive counselling intervention** that enhances individuals' adaptability, intentionality, and capacity to articulate coherent life stories (Hartung and Taber, 2015, as cited in Kleynhans, 2022). Because artistic careers tend to be *protean*—unpredictable, project-based, and shaped by continuous reinvention—the CCT framework provides an appropriate lens for understanding actors' professional development. The use of narrative tools such as the *Autobiographical Workbook for Professional Success: My Career Story (MCS)* (Savickas and Hartung, 2012) allows researchers and practitioners to capture the key goals of life design: adaptability, self-narration, intentional action, and meaning-making (Hartung and Santilli, 2018).

Using the MCS as a guiding framework for two semi-structured interviews with eight actor participants, this study employed qualitative content analysis to identify the factors influencing actors' career choices and development within a

career construction perspective. The results supported findings in the literature identifying two overarching life themes: *the unique journey through which actors construct their career choice and the trajectory of career development* (Kleynhans, Nel and Maree, 2024).

Within the unique journey theme, external factors included the influence of significant people—such as admired actors or mentors—who inspired participants' professional choices. Internal factors reflected a deep sense of calling, with many participants expressing that *acting had chosen them*, rather than the reverse. Participants also emphasized artistic skills and disciplined effort as determinants of success, while others highlighted inborn talent and passion. Interest in artistic and social domains was universal, accompanied by a rejection of conventional or routine professional paths. Consistent with previous studies (Bahia, Janeiro and Duarte, 2007; Kleynhans et al., 2024), participants articulated a desire for *social intervention*—to positively impact others through their art—and a strong need for *freedom of expression* as defining aspects of their professional identity.

The second theme, trajectory of career development, revealed elements of *career adaptability*. At the level of *career concern*, participants demonstrated awareness of the need for continuous preparation and long-term professional goals. *Career control* emerged through their commitment to training, perseverance, and proactive self-management. *Career curiosity* appeared in narratives about creating personal opportunities, expanding artistic range, and continually reinventing the self. *Career confidence* varied across participants, with students and early-career actors often expressing a need to strengthen self-efficacy and the courage to express their authentic voice. Several participants also described *career agency*—determination to persist despite repeated setbacks and a desire for autonomy in choosing projects and artistic contexts. Personality traits such as openness to experience and agreeableness were commonly reflected in their narratives, consistent with previous research on artists' vocational dispositions.

The application of the MCS proved especially valuable in facilitating reflection, coherence, and insight. Participants reported that the MCS helped them articulate their professional identities, integrate fragmented experiences, and recognize recurring life themes mirrored in their favourite stories or admired characters. For student actors, in particular, the MCS served as a *mirror of the self*, enhancing self-understanding and validating the decision to pursue acting as a suitable career. The process generated new insights and connections, clarified personal strengths, and highlighted areas for further development—such as self-confidence, perseverance, and creative autonomy.

Moreover, MCS responses revealed shared psychosocial needs among actors: the pursuit of recognition and prestige, collaboration with creative and empathetic peers, and work environments that foster support and freedom of expression. Participants articulated aspirations for continuous personal and

professional growth, a commitment to authenticity, and openness to new challenges, such as expanding from theatre into film.

While this exploratory study was based on a limited sample of eight actors and therefore cannot be generalized, its findings underscore the usefulness of the **Career Construction Theory** and the *My Career Story* workbook in understanding how actors author meaningful career narratives. These tools illuminate how life themes, adaptability resources, and self-narratives coalesce to sustain identity, purpose, and resilience in a profession defined by uncertainty and transformation.

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