

Career SUPERDRIVE: A Qualitative Evaluation of Serious Play in the Career Exploration Process

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Abstract: Play has long been recognized as a way to promote learning, creativity, and self-insight. This study investigates the use of a career-oriented board game played with others in person. Results from 11 Singapore-based working professionals who were looking for career direction show that playing a board game in a group setting can be an effective way to brainstorm for possibilities, broaden perspectives, foster individual meaning-making and insight, and promote reflection and self-awareness, thereby creating clarity and confidence in their future career plans. These are important aspects in developing career adaptability and the ability to thrive in a complex, fast-changing world.

Introduction

The pace of technological change being brought in by the Fourth Industrial Revolution will cause complex disruptions to the social and economic landscape, resulting in redundancies of current jobs, augmentation of jobs with technology, and the emergence of new jobs (World Economic Forum, 2018). These new realities give rise to a chaos theory of career development, wherein careers and individuals are seen as complex, interconnected, dynamic systems, and linear, logical thinking is no longer sufficient (Pryor & Bright, 2011). Against this backdrop, working adults need to cultivate career adaptability in the way they explore, plan, and decide on their careers, as well as in maintaining individual resources to cope with current and future changes and transitions in their jobs and careers (Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015).

Career exploration is defined as a process to identify career goals and facilitate career development, involving information-gathering about oneself and the external environment (Blustein, 1997). It also encompasses reflection on work as an expression of one's self and a way to connect with others, and an appreciation of how career experiences blend with relationships and experiences outside the workplace; this interconnected web of relationships, culture, and experiences give rise to career interests,

possibilities, and choices (Kenny, Blustein, & Meerkins, 2018). It is becoming an ongoing, rather than one-time, process, requiring individuals to continuously develop themselves and chart their own paths. Schein (1996) uses the term "internal career" to describe one's sense of direction regarding work life, as opposed to an "external career" which is determined by societal and organizational structures. In the current and future socio-economic context, protean careers (driven by the person, not the organization) will thrive, and the goal will be psychological success based on individual values. Careers will be viewed as continuous learning and adaptation amidst change, as one integrates their career with self-identity (Gubler, Arnold, & Coombs, 2014; Hall, 1996).

Traditional career counseling had focused on external careers. This process, centered on person-occupation matching, looks at the job market, teaches one how to update resumés or social media profiles, and gives tips on interview skills. A standard-bearer of this is the book *What color is your parachute?* (Bolles, 2017), where the first six chapters are devoted to job hunting and salary negotiation, before two chapters on self-inventory. While this is still relevant and practical, modern career development also seeks to integrate identity, self-concept, social roles, and cultural context (Savickas, 2012). The impact

of globalization and technological changes on the traditional employer-employee contract of lifelong employment have shifted the responsibility for career development to the individual, and the focus has changed to lifelong learning and a more integrated view of career and life roles (Stebbleton, 2010). Set in this broader context, traditional methods are also less able to capture the external influences affecting career decisions, such as family expectations, life circumstances, and availability of options (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

Individuals who actively engage in career exploration have a clearer sense of their career identity and are more optimistic about their career prospects (Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015). However, not everyone may voluntarily undertake this, due to lack of confidence, skills, access, or encouragement from their environment (Zikic & Hall, 2009).

This research looks at how individuals can approach career exploration within the modern context, with fun and playfulness, using a board game played with others. This is both a contrast and a complement to typical approaches in career counseling, and answers a call by career development psychologists to infuse play into the career exploration process, using it to foster adaptability, creativity, and resilience (Hartung, 2002). While there has been much research on play as a general counseling or therapy tool, the specific intersection of board games and career development is not yet widely studied; this study aims to contribute to that.

This research examines how injecting an element of play and fun, specifically in the form of a board game, can benefit working adults in the process of career exploration. This study focuses on professionals who have at least five years of work experience, for a number of reasons. First, undergraduates and graduate students typically receive career guidance services from their educational institutions. Secondly, those who have just one to two years of work experience are still adapting to their new environment and may not yet be thinking of the next phase of their careers. Thirdly, it requires time, experience, feedback, and reflection to gain clarity on

one's career directions and motivations (Schein & van Maanen, 2013).

The primary research question is "how does the experience of playing a career-oriented board game contribute to career exploration?" This presupposes that play does have a role in individuals' process of discerning the next steps in their careers. From the literature review, it will be shown that play, as a natural and universal human activity, promotes creativity and adaptability, and that these are essential capacities to have when one is reflecting on career directions. Therefore, this research looks at what happens when play, in the form of a board game, is injected into the career exploration process.

Specific questions that this research aims to answer:

1. How do professionals process career exploration when playing a board game?
2. What emotions, experiences, and insights do individuals have during and after playing?
3. How does the presence of other individuals (players) affect one's experience?
4. How does the experience of playing affect one's perspective on career exploration?

Literature Review

Career Exploration in the 21st Century

Career exploration has become a lifelong iterative process; exploration, planning, and decision-making are useful coping tools to prepare for changes in the socio-economic landscape (Blustein, 1997; Zikic & Hall, 2009). In contrast to a job search that reviews one's suitability to a certain type of work, career exploration also looks at psychological, social, and cultural factors that may affect one's career goals and outcomes (Blustein, 1997).

Traditional career counseling took the form of vocational guidance, by helping the individual gain self-knowledge, providing information on jobs, and matching the self to an occupation and work environment

(Savickas, 2012). Many career counselors consider their job done when the individual makes a decision on an occupation, but in the modern context, the goal of career counseling should be for individuals to learn how to take actions that will enable them to have more satisfying careers and personal lives (Krumboltz, 2009).

With this overlap of personal and work arenas, career choices become forms of self-expression, which necessitates an understanding of one's identity and values. Schein (2013) calls this guide to career choices "career anchors," being built on one's self-concept of competency, motivations, and values with regard to work and career. These anchors become salient to the individual especially in times of transitions or crucial decisions. Difficulties in career decision-making might be rooted in an identity crisis, when one strives to maintain a sense of continuity while adapting to and integrating changes (Erikson, 1968; Munley, 1977). In Erikson's (1968) stages of psychosocial development, career exploration taps into the struggle between identity and role confusion, and between generativity and stagnation.

Career exploration can bring uncertainty and ambiguity, and individuals need to address and cope with associated emotions (Zikic & Hall, 2009). They may feel anxiety caused by myths and generalizations about career choices, and are thus unable to engage in constructive career activities (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1987). Distress might also be caused by how introspection brings out discomfort from discrepancies between self-perception and feedback from others, or between aspirations and reality ((Praskova, Creed, & Hood, 2015). This research looks at play's potential to reduce anxiety and spur constructive activities.

Building on Super's seminal career development theory in 1953 that added a developmental perspective to the traditional occupation-centric view, modern career exploration theories aim to integrate self, life-roles (work and non-work), and the role of work in one's life (Savickas, 1997). With this, the goal was not just to fit individuals to

careers, but also to help them fit work to their lives. Savickas proposes adaptability as the new paradigm, to learn strategies to cope and thrive in different and changing contexts.

Work is a significant part of life; it gives a sense of identity and purpose, and contributes to one's well-being (Hartung & Taber, 2008). Savickas (2012) puts forth life design and career construction as a modern method of career counseling that focuses on identity, adaptability, intentionality, and narrative. Identity is viewed in the context of social roles and personality, and career narratives are shaped by small life stories and broader life narratives, from which new intentions for action are created. It gives power to individuals' subjective views as agents who are in different life stages and are in varying degrees of readiness to take action that may change their beliefs, attitudes, and competencies. The result is a greater sense of self-concept, confidence, and strategies for adaptability, which link to overall well-being (Hartung & Taber, 2008).

Similar to career construction, narrative identity construction is also used to harness one's life stories to create a sense of identity, and to show the unconscious processes underlying one's approach to career changes (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). Defense mechanisms and identity issues may surface in the narratives that weave coherence and ambiguity amidst transitions. Both of these methods harness life experience to create perspective, congruence, and continuity. These methods allow more integration of nonwork aspects but are generally done in one-to-one career counseling, which presents limitations of access (Zikic & Hall, 2009).

Career exploration can also be framed as a learning task, where Kolb's model of experiential learning applies, through concrete, abstract, reflective, and active dimensions (Atkinson & Murrell, 1988). At the same time, Schein explains that while learning can be fun, it is also intertwined with anxiety, in resisting to unlearn what is no longer useful, and in the fear that learning something new might be too difficult (Coutu, 2002).

This learning process involves testing of hypotheses about one's internal and external careers, and experimenting with possible future selves by engaging in activities and cultivating networks related to the desired field of work (Ibarra, 2003). The benefits of such networks can go beyond their relation to entering a new professional group; Zhang and Huang (2018) highlight the role of peer support in career exploration, noting how peers can provide information, suggestions, emotional support, and role modeling. The strength of peer relationships has a reinforcing effect on career exploration activities and on one's self-efficacy in career decision-making.

Play as Human Nature

While there are now many different methods to help individuals in career exploration, there are still calls to integrate play into the process. The traditional view of career decision-making has valued rationality over intuition, and extrinsic over intrinsic satisfaction. Researchers have pointed out how a playful attitude can support individuals in reconfiguring their self-concepts and imagining future selves; and since it is intrinsically motivating to play, play can sustain efforts to learn new knowledge and skills to cope with external demands (Hartung, 2002). However, they did not propose a concrete game or framework for play, which is the gap this study aims to fill.

Huizinga (1949) asserts that play is an essential part of civilization and culture, contributing to the well-being of humans, beyond material and biological necessities. While play may be the direct opposite of seriousness, he recognizes that the boundaries of play and seriousness are fluid. He describes the key characteristics of play as: freedom (a voluntary activity done at leisure); an interlude (stepping into a "pretend" world with no material consequences); limitedness (bounded by a specific place and time); order (rules and limitations that test the player's capability); and community (shared experience that create a bond among the players). In playing,

winning means proving superiority in the outcome of the game. However, the ultimate motivation and essence of play is in the fun it provides, thus the urge to play is largely intrinsic.

Play is also conceived of consisting of fate and luck, a manner in which to foster creativity and innovation, as a frivolity, and as an aspect of the self (the player's desired experiences of fun, relaxation, and escape) (Sutton-Smith, 2006).

While most play is intended for enjoyment, Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014) differentiate serious play as:

1. An intentional gathering to apply the imagination.
2. Exploring and preparing, not implementing. The process prepares the participants for making better decisions, aligns their goals and action points, and creates new learning.
3. It follows a set of rules or language. It creates a safe space to imagine and challenge.

The board game used here is thus a form of serious play.

Recent advances in neuroscience show that three-dimensional play utilizes brain areas for judgment and decision-making, and develops contextual memory (Brown, 2008). As an integrative tool for creativity, play "returns us to the presymbolic drive of gut feelings, emotions, intuition, and fun from which creative insights stem, thereby making us inventors" (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999). Cognitive neuroscientists also found that "a-ha" moments are accompanied by neural activity in the right brain, but when solving problems in a more methodical left-directed way, this "eureka center" remains quiet (Jung-Beeman et al, 2004).

Play creates positive emotions that contribute to overall well-being. These broaden one's perspective on possibilities and actions to take, and build long-term physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Board games in particular have been found to be useful as a form of play therapy for children, for the

therapist to build rapport, and to understand the child's worldview (Stone, 2016). The use of a purpose-built original board game also gave homeless women a different way of talking about and seeing themselves, and provided social workers with additional data about the women's experiences (Racine & Sevigny, 2001). Specific to career development, a board game has been used as an application of narrative methods and in tandem with other techniques, which has been found beneficial in generating more clarity, motivation, and intentionality in career exploration (Franklin, Feller, & Yanar, 2014).

In relation to their chaos theory of career development, Pryor and Bright (2009) propose the use of games as a metaphor for use in career counseling. Regardless of skill and preparation, the game play and its outcomes are unpredictable and contingent on multiple factors beyond one's control; understanding this can break linear thinking and encourage the open thinking that is more suitable for dealing with uncertainty and change.

Metaphors, as widely used figurative descriptions, abound in career thinking and discussions, as in the phrases 'glass ceiling' and 'career ladder' (Inkson, 2004). While some metaphors become widely used, many are interpreted based on an individual's unique experience. Metaphors shape and structure one's thoughts; fixation on a specific metaphor can constrain thinking, and adoption of a new one opens a different perspective.

Methodology

With the research focus on the intersection of career exploration and play, the methodology chosen is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with an element of action research. Compared to narrative research that may focus on the life experience of single or small number of individuals, a phenomenological study describes the meaning of a common concept or phenomenon for individuals who experienced it, and distills the commonalities

of that experience; a defining feature of phenomenology is this distillation of individuals' experience into a synthesized description of the phenomenon's essence (Creswell, 2013). Primarily, IPA aims to investigate how people interpret their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In this case, the phenomenon is that of playing a board game, as experienced by the players. Both the phenomenon and the experience are analyzed, and there is no separation between the subject (the individual player) and the object (the game) (Creswell, 2013). This fits the research aims and the context of the subjects, who are in different stages of career exploration, and would therefore view the game from their unique perspectives.

Action research comes through in the researcher's partnership and participation in the process, thereby sharing the experience of discovery and inquiry with the subjects, and in the way discoveries are applied (Huang, 2010). Having co-created the board game and acting as the facilitator of the game experience, the researcher is thus part of the research setting, observing and interacting with the participants. Serving as both practitioner and researcher, the dual role requires engaging with the participants to generate insights and action, also understanding and analyzing their experience.

A key feature of IPA is the dual interpretation process: first, the subjects make sense of their experience, and secondly, the researcher tries to see the experience from the subject's perspective in order to make sense of their interpretation, and to explore meanings that the subject may have been unaware of. The researcher may draw general themes from the group experience, then illustrate this with an example from an individual (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Beyond the discovery of new knowledge, action research also seeks to apply the discoveries to the improvement of the situation (Dickens & Watkins, 1999).

There is no prescribed sample size of participants; IPA aims for depth rather than breadth, and most researchers select a small homogeneous sample, then analyze the

similarities and differences within the group (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This allows in-depth analysis, and although conclusions are immediately bounded by the size, a theoretical generalization is still possible (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Because of the criteria of having a similar lived experience, the participants can be selected intentionally rather than randomly, and the researcher can find a group for whom the phenomenon has relevance and importance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). For this study, the ideal participants are those who are currently exploring careers, for whom the experience of playing a career-oriented board game is more relevant than for those who are not examining it.

In IPA, data takes the forms of notes, observations, and documents from semi-structured interviews, which provide both a standard set of open-ended questions and provides freedom for the researcher to pursue other questions that may emerge during the interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al, 2009). The researcher reviews the data, highlights significant statements, describes the context in which the experience occurred, and from these two descriptions, distills the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). While the board game can be played on its own by the players, for the purpose of this research, it was played in a workshop format (called “playshop”). In this study, recorded notes and observations concurrent with the playshops were made, in addition to audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews. The first step of analysis focused on individual cases to understand unique perspectives. This is in line with IPA’s emphasis to focus on single cases before making generalizations, then to compare and contrast the themes among the individuals (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Transcripts of the interviews and notes for each participant were printed out, with notes and exploratory comments written on the side. The notes were then arranged and interpreted into emergent themes, and the themes further refined and connected to each other in clusters. The

themes common to several participants were then identified and described in this paper.

Research Setting

The Context and Setting

The primary tool used in this study is the Career SUPERDRIVE™ board game that this researcher created with other collaborators (Career SUPERDRIVE, n.d.). The Career SUPERDRIVE™ board game was designed for three to five players, with four being ideal. In the board game, players collect coins by answering questions from four categories of cards: Pop Up (personality and preferences), Move Forward (scenarios that require decisions and actions), Dig Deep (reflective questions), and Shake Up (disruptors with variable consequences). Some cards require answers in the form of drawings, songs, or acting, which engage different modes of thinking. Players also earn or lose coins through other mechanics in the game, thereby creating a dynamic and competitive environment. The first player to collect five coins each from Pop Up, Move Forward, and Dig Deep wins the game. Players are provided with a pen and paper on which to write thoughts and insights while playing. They are encouraged to interact with each other by asking follow-up questions and commenting on others’ statements.

While there are mechanics for winning and losing coins, the essence of the game is in answering the questions. Coins are always awarded as long as players answer the questions, thus the competitive element is in landing on the spaces representing gain, loss, or question cards, and not in the quality or content of one’s response. Because players take turns, over the course of the game the number of questions or tasks done by all players evens out. Thus, even the player who does not win the game ends up with data and experiences in the form of their own and others’ responses to the questions and events during the game.

The mechanics of the game, and some of the questions, are intentionally designed to serve as, and to surface, metaphors. For instance, in the game, a player may land on

the ‘Health Recovery’ space, which means resting and missing a turn. Metaphors, beyond providing comparisons or more colorful descriptions of reality, can generate new ways of perceiving and understanding, and facilitate the expression of subconscious attitudes and feelings (Gardner, 2008; Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). These scenarios are intended to create a shared external reality for the players, to elicit reactions and interpretations through their individual internal reality (Winnicott, 1971).

This board game, rather than being a game intended for pure enjoyment, falls under serious play (Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014). As an opening, participants were asked to introduce themselves and describe their career situation using a metaphor, giving the researcher a peek into their current way of thinking about their careers, as proposed by Inkson (2004). At the end of the game, the researcher as practitioner led the debrief, giving them time to reflect, synthesize their

thoughts, and share their reflections and insights. To manage time and consistency of participants’ experience across the different playshops, the game play was allotted 1 to 1.5 hours. If a player wins in less than an hour, the game continues; if there is no winner after 1.5 hours, the game stops. In total, each playshop lasted 3 to 3.5 hours.

The nature of this board game is such that the spaces where a player lands (therefore the questions asked and tasks required) are subject to the roll of two dice, which means that players do not answer the same questions. In the three playshops held, there were different questions picked. No two playshops and player experiences are alike, thus, the data set does not have consistency in terms of the questions answered by each player.

The playshops were all held in a break-out room at the INSEAD Singapore campus, on weekend afternoons between November 2017 and March 2018. Figure 1 below shows the board game and related materials.

Figure 1. Career SUPERDRIVE Board Game



The Research Participants

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Have at least five years of work experience, though not necessarily currently employed.
2. Living and working in Singapore.
3. Currently in a process of career exploration; for example, looking for a new direction, in transition, or planning immediate next steps for career development.
4. Willing to have a follow-up one-on-one interview to gather more data on the individuals' experience.

Participants consented to have their demographic information used and presented in this study. In post-playshop semi-structured interviews, they were asked about their career context (situation, challenges, objectives); their experience during the playshop (emotions and insights); and their career exploration process (typical approach and action steps they intended to take). All interviews took place within 10 days of the playshops and were audio recorded.

To recruit participants, the researcher circulated a message to professional and personal contacts who might fit the criteria or know others who do. This applies two of the methods (from one's own contacts and

referral from others) outlined by Smith et al (2009) in recruiting participants for an IPA study. From 20 potential participants, 11 were successfully included. Of the rest, five misunderstood the purpose of the study (they were curious about the game but were not in career exploration) so they were not included; two individuals confirmed their participation but later withdrew due to scheduling conflicts; and finally, two other participants joined a playshop but did not respond to the request for a follow-up interview, so their data points are excluded here. Of the final 11 participants, eight are the researcher's first-degree contacts, while three were referred by first-degree contacts.

All participants have at least a bachelor's degree, with eight having post-graduate degrees. There were six women and five men. The average age is 39.6, with the youngest participant at 30, and the oldest at 55 years old. The number of years of work experience ranges from six to 30, with the average at 17.18 years. The 11 participants represent nine nationalities. While it was not a primary intention to have this range of diversity on these dimensions, it can be seen as contributing to the richness of the participants' experience in the study. The participant profiles are outlined in Table 1 below, with names changed to protect their privacy.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Highest Educational Attainment	Years of Working Experience	Main Field of Work/ Occupations Held
<i>Playshop 1</i>						
Grace	Female	38	Singaporean	Ph.D.	15	Publishing/editing
Monica	Female	30	Filipino	Bachelor's Degree	7	Engineering
Benedict	Male	30	Sri Lankan	Master's Degree	6	Research, teaching
<i>Playshop 2</i>						
Jan	Male	48	Dutch	Master's Degree	25	Human resources management
Isaac	Male	55	Singaporean	Master's Degree	30	Economist, researcher, business consulting
Aida	Female	34	Indonesian	Bachelor's Degree	13	Information technology management

Lena	Female	43	Polish	Master's Degree	24	Banking; coaching and training
<i>Playshop 3</i>						
Antoine	Male	39	Canadian	Master's Degree	18	Software engineering, scientific research, technology consulting
Carl	Male	44	Australian	Master's Degree	23	Information technology consulting; training and development
Raven	Female	37	Filipino	Bachelor's Degree	15	Supply chain management
Sophie	Female	41	French	Master's Degree	20	Procurement and logistics

Findings

The playshop generated insights for all the participants, through playing the board game, interacting with other participants, and reflecting on this experience. Although they have different backgrounds and career challenges, there are commonalities among their emotions and reactions during the playshop, and in the sense-making that occurred as a result.

The participants came to the playshop bringing with them anxieties stemming from their current situation. The game served to contain and process this experience in a different light, thereby leading to clarity of options and a sense of agency in career exploration. The main themes that emerged are:

1. Participants benefited from the fun and playful elements injected into what they often experience as a serious and lonely process.
2. The playshop served as a transitional space where they experienced and expressed vulnerability and authenticity, and formed social bonds.
3. Playing the board game helped to open and assess possibilities.
4. The board game and playshop serve as sense-making tools for career exploration.
 - a. Mirror and simulate reality, test reactions
 - b. Gain perspective about work and career

- c. Prompting decision-making and action

Surprise! It's actually fun! (Or, what this tells us about what they think of when they think of career planning/guidance/counseling)

Most of the participants enjoyed the playshop, actively participating in the board game, laughing, and making jokes. Although there were serious moments and thought-provoking questions, they reported experiencing positive feelings such as hope, optimism, interest, pride, and fun. After playing the board game, Jan expressed disbelief that 1.5 hours had passed so quickly, and that he did not check his mobile phone even once. This is akin to flow—an immersive combination of enjoyment, focus, and challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In career exploration, these positive emotions may break habitual thinking and create impetus to: gather information on types of careers and market trends; envision achievement of their future goals; and to be creative in their search process (Fredrickson, 2001). Curiosity is also a crucial component in career exploration (Savickas, 1997).

However, this is not a big insight, since one should expect that fun and joy are core features of a game. What is more interesting is that participants expressed surprise over this. Both Jan and Carl explicitly said that they were surprised that they enjoyed the game. Isaac said, “we didn’t get bored and that’s a good thing.” Grace said, “I didn’t expect that we would do funny things.”

Benedict said, “The whole approach as a game was not something I imagined in a career counseling session.” This reveals a common perception that career guidance is a serious undertaking, which may induce anxiety among individuals and cause them to avoid it, or constrain their thinking (the opposite effect of positive emotions).

Vulnerability, authenticity, and social support

Some participants mentioned anxiety as they started to play the board game, illustrating learning anxiety (Coutu, 2002) and how transitional spaces reflect the internal reality (Winnicott, 1971). In relation to her earlier words about playing with the other participants, Aida said, “At certain points I felt vulnerable because I have to open up to people I don’t know. It was a worry at the beginning because you don’t know them, you don’t know what their contexts are.” Jan shared his observations on the group: “The interesting part is, in the beginning, most players are testing the waters, who says what, how open you wanna be. Then you get into this second phase of opening up a bit more, being more authentic.”

For Carl, the moment when he revealed his vulnerability (“I may look calm but I’m sh**ting myself”) was an expression of authenticity. The chuckles he made while speaking about this during the interview betrayed the stress and anxiety that come with self-disclosure. This benefited Carl as he felt a strong sense of alignment between his inner self and his decision about his next career move. For his co-players, this moment sparked reflection, empathy, and a willingness to be vulnerable themselves.

Showing vulnerability is an expression of courage, because vulnerability is linked to fear and shame, which are typically kept hidden from others (Brown, 2012). As Jan noted about showing oneself and letting go of other personas, exposing themselves emotionally led to feelings of empathy, a sense of belonging, and trust. Antoine said, “To me, it was surprising that a room of strangers would be so open in sharing. And I think it provided a very good environment to

share. Normally when you’re in a public space, people share very superficial things that put them in a good light or increase their status whereas here, people were sharing real sentiments. I find that the game was very conducive in identifying truths.” Participants also used “liberating, unburdening, relief” to describe how they felt. This is the essence of parrhesia, where they felt psychologically safe to speak the truth about themselves (Foucault, 1983).

Many also derived authenticity through feedback given by other players. Jan described it as ‘powerful’ when he saw for himself how different his answers were to the ‘All Play’ cards (that require all players to answer). He knew that he thought differently, and received reinforcement of that self-concept. “In this setting, it’s not just about coming up with something, [the answers are] pretty genuine, but when people you don’t know start highlighting these things, it’s great, it’s nice.” Antoine echoed this; other’s feedback served as validation of his self-image.

Most of the participants have not experienced formal career exploration programs, nor do they have conversations about this with colleagues or friends. Their reflections on this aspect reveal feelings of loneliness as they go through the process of career exploration, and that in the absence of access to formal programs, they view this process as a solitary undertaking. Raven shared that she does not discuss this even with her husband.

The presence of others and the playshop serving as both a transitional space to discuss career exploration, and a container for anxiety and vulnerability, presented significant benefit for the participants. For Isaac and Antoine, as independent consultants, they had no natural group or structure to support them. “I think there was a nice cross-section of people, and one thing is that nobody has it really made. Everybody thinks that they are the only one living that situation but through the playshop you find out that others [are too]. It’s most likely that my peers are also facing the same situation,

even though they're not voicing it out," Antoine said as he weighed in about the need for peer support in the fast-growing gig economy. Isaac spoke about his difficulty in getting others to understand his dilemma. Their experiences highlight the crucial role of peer support and relationships, and the importance of psychological safety in such groups (Kenny et al., 2018; Zhang & Huang, 2018).

From Ogden (1986) we know that meaning is created from differences. The participants all appreciated hearing from others' experiences and perspectives. They gained knowledge about various career paths and drew comfort and reassurance from hearing about others' doubts and struggles, whether through projection or comparison. Sophie said, "The best learning is that everybody is questioning. Even if they're happy right now, [they're thinking] will the next step be stable or unstable, will I be happy? It's reassuring because you think to yourself, it's ok, I'm not alone in there." Aida illustrated a case of projection and learning as she mentioned Lena: "I see myself a lot similar to Lena, in the way of thinking... she is careful and reflects a lot about herself. In a way it's sharing [of thoughts], in another way it's an encouragement." Monica felt grateful for her relative sense of clarity and certainty compared to Grace and Benedict.

Playing with people they did not know created a sense of safety, trust, and openness. Aida noted, "I felt appreciative of the other people because they are less judgmental. And if they are judgmental, you don't really care either (laughs). So, at the end of the day it's great because you can see that other people are being honest about themselves." Even for Benedict who said that he does not typically like group sharing sessions, it was comfortable. Sophie added, "Because they're strangers, people you probably won't meet again, it's ok, there are no stakes, it's not embarrassing, I found it fun. But [if they were peers] from my company, I wouldn't be as open." Antoine shared similar thoughts.

The shared experience of the playshop can lead to the formation of relationships within

the group. As Carl spoke about what he learned from the others, he casually mentioned wanting to reconvene as a group in a few months. He added in the interview, "we are all resources to each other in this game. I can support them in some way, they can support me in some way." Antoine said, "Even though I don't know these individuals, it was a big step towards a common understanding that you would have with a friend. If I were to meet them again, there would be a shared interest in their success, simply because of common experience." These echo what researches have written about regarding the bonding power of play (Huizinga, 1949; Winnicott, 1971) and how the expression of vulnerability creates trust and deep relationships (Brown, 2012), as well as relational aspects of career exploration (Kenny et al., 2018).

Opening and assessing possibilities

A third key theme running through the participants' experience of the playshop is that of possibilities being opened and laid out for them to assess. In uncovering his passions and drivers, Benedict saw more types of occupations that he could pursue. Grace displayed her enthusiasm for design.

Those employed in large organizations saw a stark contrast. For Raven, hearing about the other participants' diverse career paths, and answering the questions asking for blue-sky thinking made her realize that she has been in a box, self-limiting her range of options. "Typically I would have career conversations with my boss and it's straightforward, 'this [position] is what I want, how long will it take, etc.' But I don't think I've ever had such a career discussion on 'hey, what do you want to do?' so what's different is that this talks about possibilities. When I have a career discussion in the company, it's [only] about what I can do in this company."

Monica's employer provides a systematic and concrete framework for her to write her long-term career plans, but the playshop was more effective in generating awareness about herself as it also encouraged reflection on her strengths and values. For Monica and Aida,

the playshop resulted in an affirmation of their commitment to their current organizations. Both of them gained confidence to speak with their managers about their career aspirations and to seek help in realizing them. This illustrates an alignment between their work and non-work identities, wherein they merge individual preferences with organizational demands (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013).

Sophie and Raven, both prioritizing family needs, saw possibilities opening, but consciously decided to delay action. Raven still enjoys her current role in a large organization, seeing things to learn and ways to contribute. She needs a trigger to push her into action, and painted the ideal scenario of dipping her toes in new waters while remaining in the same boat, but bemoaned her lack of time to do so. Time is also a huge factor for Sophie, who knows that she needs to cultivate new networks, but is realistic about the demands of her family and current job. Perhaps this shows their state of denial and resistance to change, but still, the playshop has seeded in them ideas and hope, and reconciled aspirations with reality.

The board game and playshop serve as sense-making tools for career exploration which mirror and simulate reality.

The participants' experience of playing the board game aligns with Winnicott's (1971) interpretation of play as a way to reflect, fantasize, and test reality in a safe way, with experiential learning (Atkinson & Murrell, 1988) and with the intended benefits of serious play (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). Most of the participants found it a non-threatening way to engage and interact with each other. At the same time, anxieties were also felt and dealt with. The game elements broke the ice and served as a Trojan horse to deeper reflection. "At first, if you didn't tell me it was about career exploration, I wouldn't know because it felt like we were only playing a game. But later on, as the game progressed, I valued hearing from other people's experiences and reflecting on mine as well," Raven said.

Some participants found direct parallels between the scenarios presented in the board game and their past or current experiences. For Lena, the competitive element of the game triggered discomfort, mirroring her current situation of having to compete with others for contracts. She realized that this stems from a belief in equality and unique strengths of different people, and therefore she prefers to collaborate rather than compete. This is one of the main reasons for her desire to find full-time corporate employment. Grace and Aida connected their tense, fearful reactions to the Shake Up cards with their dislike of uncertainty. However, after more rounds of play and seeing positive disruptions occur, their anxieties subsided. Antoine had strategized competitively and was close to winning when another player drew a card that altered the playing landscape, resulting in a second-place finish for him; this was a reminder that although he likes to be in control, things do not always work out as planned. These instances show how the game metaphor was brought to life in the context of career development as proposed by Pryor and Bright (2009).

Grace and Benedict, who both feel urgency to find jobs that suit their interests and qualifications, expressed that although they gained insights from the playshop, it did not help them come closer to finding a job. This disappointment may be an illustration of what Ogden (1986) describes as reality in defense against fantasy, where the result is a closed imagination. While both of them discovered different options during the playshop, once the transitional space ended and reality returned (in the follow-up interview), their anxieties resurfaced. This is seen in Grace's refusal to even consider exploring a different field of work despite her strong interest in it, and in Benedict's citation of his advanced degree as a reason for staying on the same path. Perhaps it is also a manifestation of the anxiety of learning and letting go of long-held beliefs.

Gain perspective about integration of self and career.

Modern career development theories such as chaos theory of careers (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and protean careers (Hall, 1996) emphasize taking a wider perspective rather than zooming in narrowly when talking about career exploration. In the board game, questions from Pop Up and Dig Deep categories ask about personality preferences, family influence or popular culture. At the end of the playshop, the different threads are woven into to their context. For Grace and Benedict, the seemingly “peripheral questions” about personality nudged them to think of job-personality fit and their values. The insight that has stuck most for Raven is that “if you wanna explore your career, you have to also know yourself. It can’t be [just] about what you want to do in the future, it’s also about anchoring who you really are, and what interests you. I thought that was the purpose [of the game].” Benedict echoed this; he had confirmed his intellectual and curious nature, which drives him to seek work that gives tangible contributions to society.

There was also introspection on the meaning of work, identity, working identity, and career anchors, and how these affected overall life satisfaction. For some, work is a very important part of their lives. Benedict revealed his struggle to define who he is, without a clear career direction or job description. Lena and Aida viewed work as a marker of achievement. Isaac, who said that at this stage, career is not important to him anymore, reflected on Lena’s words and admitted that he too derives a sense of external validation through work. At his life stage, he was contemplating the meaning of generativity versus stagnation (Erikson, 1968). For Grace, since work occupies much of her daily life, it is important to have career direction. Carl cited both practical responsibilities and the conviction that he has a lot to offer, as reasons for putting importance on work and career.

For others, the playshop allowed them to juxtapose work and career alongside other aspects of their lives, leading them to position

it outside the center. Antoine appreciated this transitional space as a way to delineate work and his perspective of work. “It’s not about work, the actual responsibilities. We talked about the impact that the work has on ourselves and our perspectives with regard to work, our relationship with work. It’s useful because it may be improved or better understood or changed, without necessarily changing the work.”

For Jan, success at this stage of his career is not about a title or paycheck; it’s about doing something interesting, meaningful, fun, and of service to others. This aligns with his approach to the board game, where he actively gave feedback to others and was gratified when they appreciated and internalized it.

As a transitional object to the next action step.

Playing the board game helped the participants prepare for decisions and actions, as Kristiansen & Rasmussen (2014) noted about the benefit of serious play. Grace described her typical approach to career planning as “thinking, thinking, and thinking.” She also reads books and does self-help exercises. These are all solitary, left-brain directed activities that lead to rumination and do not generate insights. Hence, articulating their thoughts helped shape them. “You make discoveries that you don’t make when you’re just thinking about them. When you start talking about these things with other people, things come out that are sometimes a bit unexpected,” Isaac echoed. Monica added that the act of verbalizing her behavior and motivations brought out new thoughts, and concretized her ideas and plans.

With this transitional space serving as a laboratory to learn and experiment with different ideas, most of the participants gained clarity and energy to pursue decisions and actions towards their goals. When Carl expressed his dream of becoming an international speaker, the other players nodded and affirmed his capabilities; this can be taken as an experiment to test a possible future self (Ibarra, 2003). Carl described careers as art, not science, “Nothing is linear,

nothing is guaranteed, it's taking a risk, putting yourself out there. You can have a plan, but be flexible on the plan." This is in line with Savickas (1997) and Krumboltz's (2009) propositions on adaptability and learning from unplanned events.

Aida and Monica gained confidence to speak with their managers about their career plans. Within days after the playshop, Lena went from reflection to action, updating her resumé and submitting it to a bank for a human resources role. She also planned to engage someone to coach her on interview skills, since it had been 20 years since her last job search activity. Carl, who affirmed his decision to take a new career path, realized at the end of the playshop that he needed to refine his service proposition. On the day of the follow-up interview, he crafted an email introduction to reach out to potential business contacts. He also started putting together a portfolio of his work to establish credibility in his new field.

For Isaac, the playshop crystallized the idea of taking a break to re-assess his career plans. Jan and Antoine both articulated their timelines for the next stage, and key tasks and success metrics involved. Benedict resolved to learn new skills and named specific courses to take. Grace continues her job search, with new dimensions in mind. The participants exhibited curiosity and confidence to take action, which are components of adaptability (Hirschi et al., 2015).

Discussion

The playshop delved into multiple layers of experience, akin to a set of nesting Russian dolls. An intact Russian doll is cute and attractive, a seemingly innocuous plaything that, to the uninitiated, looks like an ordinary toy. But there is more underneath the surface. This encapsulates the findings from this research.

The board game is represented by the largest of the Russian nesting dolls, as the visible manifestation and entry point. It also contains and holds the smaller dolls, which represent the deeper layers of the playshop

experience—career and self. The next layer represents one's career situation, through which we uncover underlying conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions about one's career and self. The dolls are painted with images of a person, which may show different expressions on each layer; similarly, the playshop can validate self-perceptions or reveal differences in one's outer and inner reality. Playing with the dolls means opening, taking out, and laying out the smaller dolls. The board game induces reflection on different aspects of one's life experience, personality, goals, motivations, and anxieties. It can lay bare one's inner thoughts, and give rise to vulnerability. Akin to putting the dolls back together, the board game integrates these aspects, crystallizing them into career directions and decisions that are coherent for the individual. The dolls also represent boundaries--- not everyone is ready, capable, or willing to spike into the unconscious and open all the layers. Within the game, participants have free choice on their level of self-disclosure.

The Russian doll is whole and integrated, akin to the authenticity felt by the participants, as they discovered and revealed aspects of their personal lives, socio-cultural context, and work experiences. Career exploration is inseparable from these. The playshop fosters synthesis: sensory impressions, feelings, knowledge, and memories come together in a unified way (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999) and the resulting narratives, metaphors, or art, are a form of creation and an expression of human intelligence (Gardner, 2008).

Implications and Recommendations

For individuals, these findings show the importance of looking beyond a simple job search, and integrating one's nonwork life and identities within career exploration. Actively designing this integration requires introspection, time, and creativity. A playful approach, like playing this board game, reduces anxiety, encourages different ways of thinking, and generates new insights. The findings also highlight the critical role of

social support, so individuals need to cultivate strong relationships with others with whom they can disclose themselves, or engage a career development professional.

For career development practitioners, these findings underscore common perceptions of career exploration and guidance as serious, anxiety-inducing undertakings, and perhaps contribute to individuals' reluctance to seek it. These results show the potential use of the Career SUPERDRIVE™ board game as a non-threatening way to start individuals on the process. The experiences reported by the participants are similar to what methods such as life design/career construction and narrative identity construction aim for, so the game could complement and pave the way for the rest of the process. It can also be used to form peer support groups that create psychological safety.

The board game incorporates questions and scenarios that prompt reflection on various aspects of one's self (such as preferences, past experiences, and personality traits) and external factors (family and social environment, economic trends, and technological change), and plays out in real-time the impact of each player's actions on other players and on the game, thus surfacing interconnected threads. This is a reflection of the openness and dynamism of chaotic systems, which requires individuals to evaluate patterns from different aspects in one's life and to create an emergent future with each step taken within these complex systems (Pryor & Bright, 2011). The role that chance plays out in the acts of rolling the dice, landing on different spaces, and drawing unexpected questions and events; this can be seen as a form of planned happenstance, where unforeseen events become an opportunity for learning (Krumboltz, 2009; Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999). Career development practitioners can use the game as a tool, container, and transitional space to simulate these concepts, and in tandem with other tools and techniques, facilitate meaning-making for individuals.

One example of the game's utility would be to gather individuals to play the board game, followed by one-on-one interventions based on career construction or other methods. In this way, both the individual and practitioner gain a view of the individual and how he/she relates to others during the game, which adds to the data gathered from other methods. The bonds formed among the players can also be used as a foundation for peer support and coaching, with the practitioner providing supervision as necessary. Career development then becomes a shared social experience. However, the fact that the game requires multiple players presents a limitation for practitioners who face practical constraints in gathering groups.

For organizations, career exploration should be done more broadly to develop self-awareness and encourage unconstrained exploration among employees. Because employers no longer guarantee long-term careers, they should equip employees with career exploration capabilities. While there might be fears that employees will leave as a result of this, the cases of Monica and Aida show that it can also result to re-affirmation of commitment. Corporations typically proclaim their values, and when employees examine their own and find congruence, they become more committed to the organization (Posner, Kouzes, & Schmidt, 1985). Organizations could also explore using this game as part of career development conversations and as a career planning tool, just as other games are used for various business purposes.

In Singapore, where this research was conducted, the economy is heavily reliant on human capital, but the field of career development is fairly new. The government is investing heavily in training career development professionals and providing resources and services to workers, but many of the approaches and tools still focus solely on individual profiling and occupational matching (Wong, 2016). Career SUPERDRIVETM could be another tool for career development professionals to use in helping individuals make sense of their

careers and lives amidst this time of complexity and change.

Limitations

This study has many limitations. Although there is diversity in nationality, age, work experience, and industry backgrounds among the subjects, there is not enough data, nor is it the aim of this study to generalize to a specific nationality, age group, or industry. In addition, most of the subjects work in corporate fields, so the applicability to other professional areas is not explored here. The participants are all broadly in the career exploration process, so this study is not focused on a specific aspect of career exploration (e.g. transitions, decision-making).

All the subjects are living and working in Singapore, ranked second on the 2019 Global Talent Competitiveness Index (INSEAD, 2019). Singapore has high potentiality to attract, grow, and retain talent, thereby creating a dynamic market, which could be a factor in encouraging career exploration. Individuals in other countries that do not have this environment may have a very different experience of the playful career exploration process.

Furthermore, although notes and recordings are kept and there is a semi-structured interview guide, the interpretations made in this study are made by this sole author, through the lens of personal, academic, and professional experience. Although the study was conducted to fulfill a thesis requirement with the guidance of an academic professor, as the sole researcher and facilitator of the playshops and co-creator of the board game, the researcher may have had a strong bias to see desirable results. Another researcher with a different background may reach different conclusions. The choice of methodology, the pre-selection of subjects, and the fact that most of the subjects are first-degree contacts also present multiple ways by which the results may be biased.

Future Research

There are many avenues for future research based on this study. One such is a

longitudinal study that follows the subjects through their career exploration and decision-making, and sees how long the effects of the play experience lasts. Another potential study could identify and assess differences among distinct populations (for example, age groups, occupations, or nationalities). Future research could also be done to specifically link the findings in this study with the career development theories referenced here.

This research has many applications to how organizations implement career development. Further study is needed to validate some of the subjects' feedback that they would not be as comfortable openly sharing and playing with colleagues. If that is the case, a different context, facilitation style, or set of board game questions may be needed to create a safe, conducive environment.

This study used a board game in bringing out play as an element. Future research could be done on other types of games, or perhaps on solitary games, to determine how much contribution comes from the game mechanics and from the social elements, when it comes to career-oriented situations.

While this study looked at individuals in general career exploration mode, further studies can be done to identify the use of this, or other, board games in specific parts of the process to determine whether it can also aid in practical aspects such as interviews or resumé-writing. This option might help individuals who are looking for such tangible outcomes. Another study could also be conducted to determine the validity of the board game as a tool, and when it should be used in the process.

Conclusion

The unpredictability facing individuals in their working lives requires new mindsets for adaptability. In the face of uncertainty, linear, compartmentalized thinking is insufficient; one needs to deploy a variety of capabilities to cope with changing contexts, thus intuition balances reason, flexibility supports planning, social support fosters individual agency, logic pairs with empathy, and seriousness is injected with play.

Career exploration is an important undertaking to set oneself up for success in this fast-moving environment, for individuals to gain clarity and confidence on career choices, and to integrate work with other life aspects. There are many approaches and methodologies for career exploration and planning, and what this study has shown is that play and fun, in the form of a board game, can be part of these methodologies.

This study has fulfilled the research aims in examining what the experience of playing a board game can contribute to the process of career exploration for working adults. The participants in this study experienced fun, flow, vulnerability, authenticity, and social support as they played a board game set within a career context. This resulted in lowered anxiety, increased perceptions of options, clarified values and beliefs, and broadened perspectives on work and career. These are important factors in guiding one's career-oriented activities.

Winnicott (1971) said that in playing, we discover ourselves, use our whole personality, and become creative. This is the essence of modern career exploration: designing an integrated self and life by reflecting on one's past experiences and aspirations for the future, pursuing work that satisfies internal and external needs, adapting to constant change, and having fun in the process.

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