



Discovering the effectiveness of motivational interviewing-based group counseling and gender in enhancing career adaptability

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Career adaptability; career counseling; motivational interviewing; vocational high school students.	Career adaptability (CA) is an essential psychosocial resource that enables vocational high school students to navigate career transitions and respond effectively to changing labor market demands. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Motivational Interviewing (MI)-based group counseling in improving students' CA and to investigate the moderating role of gender. A quantitative pretest–posttest control-group design with a 2 × 2 factorial structure involving treatment group (experimental and control) and gender (male and female) was employed among vocational high school students in Central Java, Indonesia. CA was assessed across four dimensions: career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. The results revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups across all four dimensions and overall CA, $F(1, 20) = 83.69, p < .01$, with higher posttest scores observed in the experimental group. Significant gender differences were identified in career curiosity, $F(1, 20) = 4.84, p < .05$, and overall CA, $F(1, 20) = 6.03, p < .05$. However, no significant interaction effects between treatment group and gender were observed ($p > .05$). These findings suggest that MI-based group counseling is a promising intervention for enhancing vocational students' career adaptability, with no evidence that its effectiveness differs significantly between male and female students.

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Introduction

In the vocational education context, Vocational High Schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan or SMK) have a critical role in preparing students to develop their skills based on job opportunity requirements. SMK students are expected to acquire both technical and non-technical skills that are relevant and adaptable to the dynamic nature of the workforce. However, the students continually face challenges in their career readiness. Several studies have revealed that SMK students often struggle with career planning and decision-making and tend to exhibit low levels of career maturity (Hamidah et al., 2022). Data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024) further indicate that SMK graduates experience a higher open unemployment rate compared to graduates from other educational levels.

Of the key constructs in career readiness is career adaptability (CA), which consists of four core dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Porfeli & Savickas, 2012). CA refers to an individual's capacity to respond effectively to the challenges and transitions within the working fields. Students with high levels of CA are generally better equipped to transform their education to employment (Porfeli & Savickas, 2012). In contrast, those with low CA are more vulnerable to career-related difficulties, including instability and frequent job changes (Zhu et al., 2019).

A variety of interventions were developed to enhance students' CA, including internships (Ocampo et al., 2020) and the use of career-based games (Hummel et al., 2018). In addition, the setting in which these strategies are implemented can also influence their effectiveness. For instance, online career counseling that implements the life design approach has been shown to improve students' CA and optimism (Istiqomah et al., 2023).

Similarly, group-based settings, such as psychoeducational groups (Pambudi et al., 2019) and group counseling sessions (Meilanda et al., 2021), have also demonstrated success in enhancing CA.

Beyond the importance of strategy and setting, the choice of counseling approach is also a critical factor in improving CA; one of which is Motivational Interviewing (MI). MI has increasingly proven useful in career counseling. Some previous studies support the view that MI is effective in enhancing CA, particularly by strengthening the dimensions of career control and confidence (Gai et al., 2022).

Conceptually, MI is a distinctive approach to engaging individuals in discussing change and growth by strengthening their motivation and commitment (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). In this approach, counselors do not serve as experts but as facilitators, while the counselee is responsible for initiating and sustaining change. Accordingly, collaboration, acceptance, empathy, and evocation are the core components of MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). This approach operates through four fundamental processes: (1) engaging in an empathetic relationship with the counsees, (2) focusing on a specific goal for change, (3) eliciting their own reasons for pursuing that goal, and (4) planning the steps the counsees is willing to take to achieve it.

Given this conceptual foundation, MI is particularly relevant for integration into career counseling. This ambivalence is closely linked to the counsees' motivation (Klonek et al., 2016; Rochat & Rossier, 2016).

In addition to examining the effectiveness of MI-based counseling on CA, another variable that needs attention in SMK context is gender. Gender was identified as a potential moderator of CA (Celik & Storme, 2018; Gong et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2018). In the study by Zhang et al., (2021), who conducted research in exploring the relationship among parental support, vocational identity, and CA across genders, gender was found to influence differences in levels of CA. However, research explicitly examining how gender moderates the effectiveness of MI-based interventions in enhancing the CA of vocational students remains limited.

Based on the explanation of how MI and gender contribute to CA and the gap in the study of vocational levels, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of group counseling using the MI approach in enhancing the CA of vocational high school students and explore the moderating role of gender in this intervention. This research is expected to contribute to the theoretical development of CA and offer practical implications for educational counselors in designing advance effective interventions to improve students' career readiness. Moreover, the study may serve as a valuable reference in developing more inclusive and evidence-based career guidance programs to support vocational students' transition into the workforce.

Method

This study involved tenth- and eleventh-grade students from SMKN in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia as the population. This study also employed purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) Students with low levels of CA; (2) Willing to participate in this study from beginning to end of sessions; and (3) Students who had not yet participated in an internship program. The sample selection was carried out in some stages. This stage begins with an initial assessment using the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS). This instrument was used to identify students with low scores across the four core dimensions of CA: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. A total of 24 students who met the inclusion criteria were selected as research participants and randomly assigned into four groups: male experimental group, female experimental group, male control group, and female control group. Each group consisted of six students.

The primary instrument used in this study was the CAAS developed by Savickas, (1997) adapted to suit the characteristics of vocational high school students. The instrument employed a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very weak) to 5 (very strong), comprising four dimensions with six items each, for a total of 24 items. All 24 items were valid at the 1% significance level; the item-total correlation coefficients exceeded the critical value of 0.254. In addition, the reliability test was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha and yielded a coefficient of 0.917. According to the 2x2 factorial design, the experimental procedure for this study consisted of three main phases: pre-experiment, intervention, and post-experiment. In the pre-experiment phase, all participants completed a baseline assessment using the CAAS to measure their CA level prior to the intervention. Participants were also given an orientation session outlining the purpose, procedures, and expectations for participation throughout the research process.

The intervention phase involved four sessions of group counseling based on the MI approach for the experimental groups (See Table 1 for the intervention procedure). Each session lasted 90 minutes and was conducted once a week. The sessions followed the four core processes of MI (i.e., engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning) by employing techniques to elicit change talk. The first session focused on the engaging and focusing phases. It aimed to build a collaborative relationship between the counselor and students while exploring students' career aspirations and perceived barriers. Techniques involved during this session were

‘asking evocative questions’ and using ‘the importance ruler’ to uncover the personal values students associate with their career goals.

The second session focused on the evoking phase. It was designed to explore the perceived benefits and challenges associated with students’ career aspirations. The counselor used the decisional balance technique to help students evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of their potential career choices. In addition, the elaboration technique was applied to deepen students’ reflections on their motivational drives and obstacles.

The third session integrated both the evoking and planning phases. Students were guided to reflect on their past experiences using ‘the looking back technique’ and to envision their future using ‘the looking forward technique’. During this session, students began developing concrete action plans to achieve their career goals. The counselor facilitated this process using action planning and querying extremes to help students identify potential challenges and appropriate coping strategies.

The final session centered on the planning phase and emphasized monitoring the students’ implementation of their action plans. The techniques involved included evaluating the progress of the action plans and engaging in group discussions to reinforce students’ commitment to their career goals. Each session concluded with feedback from the counselor to ensure that students felt motivated and confident for their plans.

Table 1. Experimental Procedures

Session	Stage/ Topic	Activities
	Preliminary Phase of Group Counseling	1. Introduction 2. Orientation and information sharing 3. Commitment identification (informed consent)
1	Building Rapport and Exploring Career Aspirations (Engaging, Focusing)	1. Building a working relationship 2. Clarifying goals (<i>Asking Evocative Questions, Importance Ruler</i>)
2	Exploration of the Pros and Cons as well as Strengthening Career Commitment (Evoking)	Enhancing motivation (<i>Exploring Decisional Balance</i>)
3	Reflection and Projection (Evoking, Planning)	1. Understanding the consequences of choices 2. Projecting outcomes (<i>Querying Extremes, Looking Back, Looking Forward, Action Planning</i>)
4	Monitoring and Closing (Planning)	1. Reviewing progress 2. Reinforcing and sustaining change

The post-experiment phase involved reassessing CA using the CAAS to evaluate changes in both the experimental and control groups. Prior to statistical analysis, data were transformed using a square-root transformation to ensure that the assumptions of parametric statistics were met. Subsequently, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the main effects of intervention type and gender, as well as their interaction, on students’ CA. In addition, paired-samples t-tests (within-group t-tests) were used to assess improvements in CA by comparing pre-test and post-test scores within each gender and intervention group.

Result and Discussion

Descriptive analysis was conducted to present the mean scores and standard deviations for each CA dimension by group assignment, gender, and time of measurement. The results indicated relatively balanced pre-test scores across groups, while noticeable differences began to emerge at the post-test stage, particularly within the experimental groups. These descriptive statistics provide an initial overview of score distribution patterns before further inferential statistical analysis using the two-way MANOVA. Detailed information on the mean and standard deviation values is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Initial Data Description

Dimension	Group	Gender	Pre		Pos	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Concern	E	M	14.167	2.93	24.67	2.50
		F	13.83	.98	25.00	2.89

Dimension	Group	Gender	Pre		Pos	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Control	C	M	16.50	4.04	16.83	2.93
		F	13.83	1.33	14.50	1.22
	E	M	15.00	2.53	23.83	2.93
		F	13.67	2.07	21.33	3.78
Curiosity	C	M	14.50	.55	16.50	3.27
		F	14.50	3.08	15.67	2.16
	E	M	14.33	1.51	22.83	3.43
		F	13.83	3.06	20.17	2.64
Confidence	C	M	15.17	2.22	17.83	1.94
		F	15.00	2.75	15.50	2.88
	E	M	15.33	2.58	23.00	3.52
		F	13.00	2.28	21.17	2.48
	C	M	14.83	1.72	17.00	3.03
		F	13.83	1.72	15.00	2.19

Note: E = Eksperiment; C = Control

Table 3. Results of MANOVA Test on CA

Dimension	Effect	F (1,20)	p
Concern	MI	81.22	<0.01
	Gender	1.22	>0.05
	MI * Gender	1.92	>0.05
Control	MI	27.31	<0.01
	Gender	1.65	>0.05
	MI * Gender	.38	>0.05
Curiosity	MI	17.65	<0.01
	Gender	4.84	<0.05
	MI * Gender	.002	>0.05
Confidence	MI	28.07	<0.01
	Gender	2.69	>0.05
	MI * Gender	.044	>0.05
Career Adaptability	MI	83.69	<0.01
	Gender	6.03	<0.05
	MI * Gender	.14	>0.05

After data analysis, the dataset was confirmed to meet the assumptions required for conducting a two-way MANOVA. The results of the two-way MANOVA for CA are summarized in Table 3. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of the treatment group on all dimensions of CA: (1) Concern ($F(1, 20) = 81.22$, $p < .01$); (2) Control ($F(1, 20) = 27.31$, $p < .01$); (3) Curiosity ($F(1, 20) = 17.65$, $p < .01$); (4) Confidence ($F(1, 20) = 28.07$, $p < .01$); and (5) Overall CA scores ($F(1, 20) = 83.69$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that students in the MI-based group counseling intervention demonstrated significantly higher levels of CA.

Secondly, a significant difference was found in the total CA scores between male and female students ($F(1, 20) = 6.03$, $p < .01$). It shows that gender significantly affected the students' CA improvements, particularly after receiving the group counseling intervention. However, gender differences were only statistically significant in the curiosity dimension ($F(1, 20) = 4.84$, $p < .05$) while no significant gender differences were found in the dimensions of concern ($F(1, 20) = 1.22$, $p > .05$), control ($F(1, 20) = 1.65$, $p > .05$), or confidence ($F(1, 20) = 2.69$, $p > .05$).

Lastly, no significant interaction effect was discovered between group and gender on overall CA scores ($F(1, 20) = 0.15$, $p > .05$). In addition, similar non-significant interaction effects were found across all dimensions. This indicates that the effect of MI-based group counseling on CA was consistent for both male and female students.

Table 4. Results of Paired Sample T-Test

Variable	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Male	17.54	-4.21	< 0.01
Female	16.63	-3.84	< 0.01
Experiment	9.81	-12.15	< 0.01
Control	5.58	-3.31	< 0.01

Based on the data analysis presented in Table 4, it is concluded that CA increased significantly across gender groups. The results showed a significant improvement in CA for male students ($t(11) = -4.21, p < .01$) and female students ($t(11) = -3.84, p < .01$). The analysis of intervention group, the findings revealed a significant increase of CA among students in the intervention group ($t(11) = -12.15, p < .01$). Although the control group also showed a slight increase, the improvement was statistically significant ($t(11) = -3.31, p < .01$).

These findings indicate that MI-based group counseling was significantly effective in enhancing CA of vocational high school students at SMKN in Central Java. The significant improvement observed in the treatment group demonstrates the strength of MI in supporting students in navigating future career challenges and transitions.

In this context, the success of aligns with the principles of Career Construction Theory. It emphasizes the importance of an individual's adaptability in response to career-related changes. Through the MI process, students are guided to identify their ambivalence regarding career choices, increase intrinsic motivation, and strengthen their commitment to positive change. In addition, MI integrates four core processes such as: (1) Engaging, to establish an empathetic connection; (2) Focusing, to set clear goals; (3) Evoking, to elicit intrinsic reasons for change; and (4) Planning, to formulate actionable steps (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). This is consistent with findings by Rochat and Rossier (2016), who reported that MI helps individuals overcome career-related ambivalence and enhances self-efficacy in career decision-making. These study findings also support the results of Gai et al. (2022), who found that MI-based counseling effectively improves CA.

In addition to Career Construction Theory, Self-Determination Theory also contributes to explaining the effectiveness of MI (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to this theory, sustainable behavioral change occurs when three fundamental psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The MI approach, which emphasizes personal value exploration, collaboration, and emotional support, aligns with the fulfillment of these needs. Consequently, the observed changes in CA are interpreted as outcomes of an internalization process fostered by a supportive relational context.

However, this study's findings diverge from those of previous research. A study by Wetstone & Rice (2023) found that brief MI interventions only improved self-efficacy and did not significantly affect all dimensions of CA. This discrepancy was attributed to the group format employed in the present study. It fostered a supportive social dynamic conducive to career exploration. In addition, Corey et al. (2006) also emphasize that group approaches enable participants to share experiences, receive feedback, and build confidence. These factors enhance the overall effectiveness of MI.

Gender-based analysis revealed that male students showed greater gains in CA compared to female students. This finding is consistent with Zhang et al. (2021), who reported that social support was more strongly associated with career commitment and exploration among male students. However, it contrasts with the results of Hirschi (2009), who concluded that gender does not significantly affect CA. These conflicting findings highlight the need for further research to explore the contextual factors that mediate the influence of gender on CA, including social support and environmental structure.

Furthermore, the absence of a significant interaction between gender and treatment group suggests that MI functions consistently across genders in enhancing CA. This may be supported by the homogeneous boarding school environment at SMKN in Central Java, which likely reduces the effect of gender-related social norms. Nonetheless, the gender intensification hypothesis Hill & Lynch, (1983) suggests that, in more heterogeneous social contexts, gender differences are more pronounced due to the presence of stereotypes. Therefore, future studies conducted in more socially and culturally diverse settings could offer deeper insights into the role of gender in moderating the effectiveness of MI interventions.

The significant improvement in CA observed in the treatment group compared with the control group highlights the effectiveness of MI as an intervention. MI techniques such as 'change talk' and 'sustain talk' enable students to explore their potential, enhance self-efficacy, and build confidence in planning their future careers. However, the modest increase in CA observed in the control group suggests that other factors (i.e.,

social support, curriculum structure, and individual student characteristics) also contribute to the development of CA. This is consistent with the principles of Motivational Systems Theory (Hirschi, 2009), which emphasizes the role of emotional stability, perceived competence, and goal clarity in fostering CA. Future research could investigate the interaction between MI interventions and these external factors to better understand how to optimize CA development.

In the context of vocational high school students, this study meaningfully contributes to the existing literature on MI's effectiveness in enhancing CA. However, several limitations are noted, including the small sample size and the homogeneity of the research setting. Future studies need to involve larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to evaluate the long-term impact of MI. Additionally, conducting research in non-boarding school environments or workplace settings could help reveal how more complex social and cultural dynamics influence students' responses to MI-based interventions.

By juxtaposing the findings of this study with previous research, the current investigation offers valuable insight into the development of MI as an innovative strategy in career counseling. This approach not only proves relevant in enhancing the CA of vocational students but also provides a foundation for future research exploring how MI-based interventions can be adapted across various career development contexts.

Conclusion

This study concludes that group counseling based on the MI approach is effective in enhancing the CA of vocational high school students at SMKN in Central Java. Furthermore, this study identified a significant effect of gender on CA, with male students showing a greater average improvement compared to female students. However, no significant interaction was found between gender and the type of intervention. This indicates that the MI approach produces consistent outcomes across both male and female students. From a practical perspective, these findings underscore the importance of MI-based group counseling as an inclusive and effective intervention strategy for improving students' career readiness. Theoretically, the results support Career Construction Theory, which emphasizes the significance of adaptive approaches in addressing career-related challenges.

Author Contributions Statement

Muhammad Khoiru Reza: Project administration, Investigation, Data curation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **DYP Sugiharto:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Sunawan:** Formal analysis, Validation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Declaration of Generative AI

ChatGPT was used during manuscript preparation to refine the language and improve the text's overall clarity and readability. The authors subsequently reviewed and revised the generated content where necessary and assume full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could reasonably be considered to have influenced the findings or presentation of this research.

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