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**Exploring the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors
in the South African context**

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Declaration

I, **Ncebakazi Jili**, declare that this research report is my original work except where otherwise indicated. The contribution of other authors has been rightfully acknowledged through in-text referencing. This research report is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the master's degree in Counselling Psychology in the School of Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus. The report has not been submitted for any examination or degree at any other institution.



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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all Registered Counsellors who have experienced unemployment.
There is light at the end of the tunnel!

Abstract

The Registered Counsellor profession is an HPCSA-recognised professional category in psychology, which was lawfully introduced in December 2003 to limit the shortage of mental healthcare services in disadvantaged areas of South Africa, specifically in primary healthcare. Thus, the Registered Counsellor profession exists in South Africa, although it is a country ranking high in unemployment. Registered Counsellors are not immune to unemployment and its effect on psychosocial well-being. A few studies concerning the Registered Counsellor profession in South Africa have statistically highlighted the drastic challenge of unemployment. As a result, there is a dearth of literature that specifically investigates the subjective experiences and effects of unemployment on the psychosocial well-being of Registered Counsellors. Consequently, this study explored the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in the South African context. A qualitative research approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, and coping strategies utilised during unemployment. A phenomenological research design was used to guide the study. Purposive sampling was the primary technique applied to select eight individually interviewed participants using a semi-structured interview method. Thematic data analysis of the participants' responses indicated that unemployment is perceived as a difficult and stressful experience. The struggle to secure employment presented an interplay of adverse effects on the participants' psychosocial well-being, mainly due to deprived financial security and social participation. Findings indicated exploring alternative opportunities, leisure activity, optimism, resilience, and social support as coping strategies. Registered Counsellors in this study predominantly applied physical, cognitive, and social resources to cope with the detrimental effects of unemployment.

List of Acronyms

APA: American Psychological Association

B. Psych: Bachelor of Psychology

CRI: Coping Resources Inventory

DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training

DPSA: Public Services South Africa

HPCSA: Health Professions Council of South Africa

HSSREC: Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee

MHCP: Mental Healthcare Practitioner

MHCU: Mental Healthcare User

NHI: National Health Insurance

NMHPF: National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan

PsySSA: Psychological Society of South Africa

QLFS: Quarterly Labour Force Survey

RC: Registered Counsellor

SAHRC: South African Human Rights Commission

SAQA: South African Qualifications Authority

Stats SA: Statistics South Africa

UKZN: University of KwaZulu-Natal

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
List of Acronyms.....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
1.1. Introduction.....	1
1.2. Background of the study.....	1
1.3. The burden of unemployment in South Africa.....	2
1.4. Problem statement.....	3
1.5. Significance of the study.....	4
1.6. Aim and research objectives.....	5
1.7. Research questions.....	5
1.8. Outline of the dissertation.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	
2.1. Introduction.....	7
2.2. The state of the mental healthcare system in South Africa	7
2.3. The Registered Counsellor profession in South Africa.....	11
2.3.1. The background of the profession.....	11
2.3.2. The scourge of unemployment amongst Registered Counsellors.....	14
2.3.3. Experiences of Registered Counsellors concerning their profession.....	16
2.4. The Registered Counsellor profession in other countries.....	17
2.5. Youth and graduate unemployment trends in other countries.....	18
2.6. Unemployment amongst the youth and graduates in South Africa.....	21
2.7. Conceptualising coping and psychosocial well-being.....	22
2.7.1. The concept of coping.....	22
2.7.2. Coping resources by Hammer and Marting.....	24
2.7.3. The construct of psychosocial well-being.....	25
2.8. Correlation between unemployment and psychosocial well-being.....	26
2.9. Coping with unemployment.....	28
2.10. Theoretical Frameworks.....	30
2.10.1. Latent Deprivation Model.....	30
2.10.2. Transactional Model of Stress and Coping.....	32
2.11. Conclusion.....	33

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction.....	34
3.2. Research approach.....	34
3.3. Research design.....	34
3.4. Research paradigm.....	35
3.5. Study setting	36
3.6. Study population.....	36
3.7. Selection of participants	37
3.8. Pilot study.....	38
3.9. Data collection method.....	38
3.9.1. Data collection instruments.....	40
3.10. Data collection procedure.....	40
3.11. Data analysis.....	41
3.11.1. Phase one: Familiarising yourself with the data.....	42
3.11.2. Phase two: Generating initial codes.....	42
3.11.3. Phase three: Searching for themes	42
3.11.4. Phase four: Reviewing potential themes.....	42
3.11.5. Phase five: Defining and naming themes.....	43
3.11.6. Phase six: Producing the report.....	43
3.12. Trustworthiness of the study.....	43
3.12.1. Credibility.....	43
3.12.2. Transferability.....	44
3.12.3. Dependability.....	44
3.12.4. Confirmability.....	44
3.13. Reflexivity.....	45
3.14. Ethical Considerations.....	45
3.14.1. Obtaining ethical clearance from relevant bodies.....	45
3.14.2. Obtaining informed consent from the participants.....	46
3.14.3. Ensuring confidentiality.....	46
3.14.4. Maintaining non-maleficence and beneficence.....	46
3.15. Conclusion.....	47

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction.....	48
4.2. Description of participants.....	48
4.3. Summary of themes and subthemes.....	49

4.4. Theme one: Subjective experience of unemployment.....	50
4.4.1. Job-seeking – a difficult experience.....	50
4.4.2. Experiencing psychosocial challenges.....	51
4.4.3. Emotions experienced towards the career choice.....	52
4.5. Theme two: Perceived factors contributing to unemployment.....	54
4.5.1. Availability of vacancies.....	54
4.5.2. The profession – Lack of recognition and advocacy.....	56
4.6. Theme three: Coping with unemployment.....	58
4.6.1. Exploring alternative opportunities.....	58
4.6.2. Leisure activities.....	59
4.6.3. Resilience and optimism.....	60
4.6.4. Social support.....	61
4.7. Theme four: A way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession.....	62
4.8. Conclusion.....	63

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction.....	64
5.2. The subjective experience of unemployment.....	64
5.2.1. Job-seeking – a difficult experience.....	64
5.2.2. Experiencing psychosocial challenges.....	65
5.2.3. Emotions experienced towards the career choice.....	67
5.3. Perceived factors contributing to unemployment.....	68
5.3.1. Availability of vacancies.....	68
5.3.2. The profession – Lack of recognition and advocacy.....	68
5.4. Coping with unemployment.....	69
5.4.1. Exploring alternative opportunities.....	69
5.4.2. Leisure activity.....	70
5.4.3. Resilience and optimism.....	70
5.4.4. Social support.....	71
5.5. A way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession.....	71
5.6. Conclusion.....	72

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

6.1. Introduction.....	74
6.2. Summary of the findings.....	74
6.3. Implications for future research and recommendations	75

6.4. Limitations of the study	76
6.5. Personal experience.....	77
6.6. Conclusion.....	77
REFERENCES.....	78
APPENDICES.....	97
Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Letter	97
Appendix B: Informed Consent	98
Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Schedule	101
Appendix D: Biographical Information.....	102
Appendix E: Turnitin Similarity Report.....	103
LIST OF TABLES	
Table 4.1 Participants' description.....	48
Table 4.2 Themes and subthemes	49

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher present the background of the study, highlighting the challenges in accessing mental healthcare in South Africa and the birth of the Registered Counsellor (RC) profession aimed at surmounting the shortage of mental health services. The state of unemployment in South Africa is discussed to accentuate the significant challenge encountered by the youth and graduates in the employment sector. Furthermore, the researcher outlines the problem statement, the significance of the study, research objectives, and research questions to contextualise the research. Lastly, the researcher provides an outline of the dissertation.

1.2. Background of the study

In South Africa, 83% of 59 million citizens depend solely on the public healthcare system, which is overburdened and under-resourced (Ngobeni et al., 2020, p.1). Many residents in South Africa experience challenges in accessing healthcare services, especially mental healthcare. The barriers to accessing mental healthcare include limited resources, distance to the nearest health facilities, and severe financial challenges. These barriers often worsen due to three factors: misunderstanding of mental health challenges, stigma against those living with mental illness, and misguided beliefs about mental illness treatment (Booyesen et al., 2021; Petersen & Lund, 2011). Consequently, mental illness contributes about 42% of the burden of disease in South Africa (Booyesen et al., 2021, p.2).

In 2003, the Professional Board of Psychology launched a new profession, the 'Registered Counsellor' to provide mental healthcare services in resource-constrained settings in South Africa. This profession entails four years of Bachelor of Psychology (B. Psych) training at an accredited higher education institution and six months of supervised practicum (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2023). Upon completion, a written board examination with a 70% pass mark is required for graduates intending to register with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). The scope of practice stipulated by HPCSA (2019) indicates that Registered Counsellors should provide psychological services and preventative interventions to promote psychosocial well-being. Secondly, Registered Counsellors also perform psychological screening, basic assessment, and psychological interventions aimed at enhancing the personal functioning of the diverse population of South Africa in different community contexts (HPCSA, 2019). These community contexts include private practice,

student counselling centres, non-government organisations, correctional facilities, primary healthcare centres, and hospitals.

Based on current statistics, there are 2640 Registered Counsellors in South Africa, accumulating yearly (HPCSA, 2021). An average of 240 graduates register annually with HPCSA to practice as Registered Counsellors. Despite that the profession is fast gaining traction, studies indicate that many Registered Counsellors experience unemployment in South Africa (Fisher, 2017; Rouillard et al., 2016). Those fortunate enough to secure employment are often based in educational settings and private practice. Limited employment opportunities are available for Registered Counsellors, especially in the public sector (Mogatosi, 2020).

1.3. The burden of unemployment in South Africa

The Registered Counsellor profession exists in South Africa, a country with an unemployment crisis among the youth (Mogatosi, 2020). Based on the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) of 2021, young people struggle to secure employment, irrespective of education level. In 2021, the official unemployment rate was 32.6% and 46.3% among young individuals aged 15 – 34 years (QLFS, 2021). The statistics on unemployment among young individuals indicate that one in every two people entering the workforce experienced unemployment in the first quarter of 2021. Among the youth, those aged 15 – 24 years are considered economically vulnerable in the employment sector. Individuals under 25 years often do not have previous work experience or possess relevant skills required in the labour sector (Mseleku, 2022). Consequently, this renders them vulnerable to unemployment.

According to Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] (2021), the graduate employment rate was 40.3% for those aged 15 – 24 years and 15.5% for those aged 25 – 34 years, while the rate among adults (aged 35 – 64 years) was 5.4%. The burden of unemployment is severe among the youth (aged 15 – 34 years) as they account for 59.5% of the total number of unemployed people (Stats SA, 2021). Graduates entering the workforce in South Africa after completing their higher education studies are likely to experience unemployment. The high unemployment trends among the youth and graduates do not merely impede the economic development prospects of South Africa but increase the levels of poverty and mental health challenges associated with unemployment (Mseleku, 2022).

Unemployment is considered a stress-inducing experience. As a result, building a career in an environment with a declining employment rate and job security poses psychological demands (Mago, 2018). Unemployment is correlated with distress and can be viewed as a causal factor.

Among young individuals, long-term unemployment has been linked to psychosocial problems such as depression, suicide, and social withdrawal (Du Toit et al., 2018; Paul & Moser, 2009).

First-time work-seekers face more than just long-term unemployment after obtaining their qualifications. They must cope with transitioning from being students to work-seekers, adjusting to a new role of establishing independence and navigating their career paths. Unfortunately, all these challenges exist in a country with scarce employment opportunities, declining job security, and limited interventions for unemployed individuals. The ailing economic climate leaves many South African graduates without employment in the context of growing higher education access in South Africa (Van Lill & Bakker, 2022).

1.4. Problem statement

As South Africa continues to rank high in the context of unemployment, the Registered Counsellor profession is not exempted from the burden of unemployment as it exists in an environment with an unemployment crisis among young people. A survey conducted by the HPCSA in 2017 revealed that the Registered Counsellor category has the youngest age profile, with an average range of 25 to 30 years, compared to other psychology professional categories such as counselling and educational psychology. This age range indicates that Registered Counsellors are more susceptible to unemployment based on their age and the state of their category in South Africa. Many studies in the last decade have indicated that most Registered Counsellors experience unemployment for an extended period of at least one year after completing their studies (Abel & Louw, 2009; Elkonin & Sandison, 2006, 2010; Kotze & Carolissen, 2005). Recent studies still accentuate the challenges of unemployment experienced by Registered Counsellors, especially in the public sector (Fisher, 2017; Mogatosi, 2020; Salt, 2021).

The key factors to the unemployment of Registered Counsellors include the lack of job opportunities in the public sector and limited recognition by the government, other health professionals and communities (Salt, 2021). Difficulties in finding stakeholders necessary to coordinate practicum for novice Registered Counsellors is another factor contributing to unemployment as it leaves them with limited work experience post-graduation (Mogatosi, 2020). In addition, the Registered Counsellor profession is yet to gain popularity in the recruitment sectors compared to other psychology categories, such as clinical and counselling psychology (Pretorius, 2019). As a result, some Registered Counsellors opt to change their career paths or further their studies due to unemployment.

The state of remaining without employment despite actively engaging in job-seeking is regarded as one of the highly anguishing experiences. It denies individuals the positive benefits associated with work, such as the opportunity to apply one's skills, interpersonal interaction, income, and general well-being (Zechmann & Paul, 2019). De Witte et al. (2012) posit that unemployment adversely affects psychological and social well-being. Psychological problems may include heightened depression, anxiety, stress, and decreased self-confidence and life satisfaction. Social challenges include feeling socially deprived and disengaged from society (Bartelink et al., 2020). Studies exploring the effects of unemployment discovered that severe psychological distress and depression were prevalent among the unemployed (Achdut & Refaeli, 2020; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). As a result, limited employment opportunities are expected to negatively affect psychosocial well-being. McKee-Ryan and Maitoza (2018) further indicate that the adverse effects of unemployment on psychological well-being are more extreme in developing countries with an ailing economy than in developed countries as they become interwoven with the effects of poverty.

Although unemployment has predominantly culminated in adverse outcomes on mental health, coping strategies might alleviate the severity of the effects. Coping strategies consist of individual attributes and environmental factors that individuals utilise to cope with difficult experiences. Vala (2017) indicated that the coping strategies applied by Registered Counsellors during their academic training included rationalisation, self-reflection, normalising their experiences, positive self-talk, and supportive relationships. Registered Counsellors may use similar coping strategies during difficult times like unemployment. Hence, it is paramount to explore the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in the South African context.

1.5. Significance of the study

A few studies concerning the Registered Counsellor profession in South Africa have highlighted the drastic challenge of unemployment statistically (Abel & Louw, 2009; Kotze & Carolissen, 2005). Other studies have focused on employed Registered Counsellors, exploring their experiences, perceptions, and potential role in providing mental healthcare services (Dark, 2020; Joubert & Hay, 2020; Rouillard et al., 2016). However, there is a need for studies that specifically concentrate on exploring the subjective experiences and effects of unemployment on the psychosocial well-being of Registered Counsellors. For this reason, this study aimed to fill this knowledge gap in extant literature. Furthermore, unemployment is a critical socio-economic challenge that adversely affects psychological well-being. Gaining insight into how

Registered Counsellors cope with unemployment is beneficial information to those who are yet to encounter similar unemployment circumstances as Registered Counsellors.

1.6. Aim and research objectives

The study aimed to provide an overview of how unemployment affects Registered Counsellors. Unemployment is linked to adverse psychological and social effects such as stress and social isolation. As a result, exploring effective coping strategies that aid in alleviating potential psychological effects resulting from unemployment among Registered Counsellors is crucial. Thus, the objectives of the study were as follows:

- 1.6.1.** To explore the unemployment experiences of Registered Counsellors after registration with the HPCSA.
- 1.6.2.** To explore factors contributing to unemployment among Registered Counsellors after registration with the HPCSA.
- 1.6.3.** To identify the coping strategies used by unemployed Registered Counsellors after registration with the HPCSA.

1.7. Research questions

In exploring the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1.7.1.** What are the experiences of unemployment among Registered Counsellors after registration with the HPCSA?
- 1.7.2.** What factors contribute to unemployment among Registered Counsellors after registration with the HPCSA?
- 1.7.3.** What specific strategies do Registered Counsellors utilise to cope with unemployment and its adversities?

1.8. Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation comprises six chapters. These are:

Chapter One: The introductory chapter outlined the background of the study, problem statement, and significance of the study, as well as the aim and objectives, research questions, and an outline of the dissertation.

Chapter Two: The second chapter discussed the extant literature on the mental healthcare system in South Africa, Registered Counsellors, unemployment and related psychosocial problems, and coping strategies.

Chapter Three: Outlines the research methodology utilised for this study. The discussion includes the research design, methods of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the chapter presents significant ethical considerations in conducting this study.

Chapter Four: This chapter thematically presented the research findings. This chapter comprises the data analysis and the study's findings constructed from eight qualitative semi-structured interviews detailing the participants' subjective experiences of unemployment.

Chapter Five: This chapter provided a detailed discussion of the findings in relation to the current study's existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The discussion is also presented under the main themes from the data analysis and the participants' narratives.

Chapter Six: This final chapter focuses on the summary of the study's research outcomes, limitations, recommendations for future research and a personal reflection that provides insight into my interest in the topic of this research project. The next chapter is the Literature Review.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

This chapter presented a detailed literature review that aims to provide narratives of sources related to the topic and depict a conceptual map for the study. The literature review unpacked the mental healthcare system, the Registered Counsellor profession, and the unemployment rates among graduates in South Africa and other countries. The chapter also discussed unemployment, psychosocial problems, coping strategies, and the theoretical frameworks (i.e., the Latent Deprivation Model and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping) that guided this study.

2.2. The state of the mental healthcare system in South Africa

Mental health is a state of well-being whereby a person attains awareness of their abilities, can cope with everyday life stressors, works productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community (Galderisi et al., 2015). Mental healthcare and mental health services are defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as follows:

“Mental healthcare is a category of healthcare service and delivery provided by several fields involved in psychological assessment and intervention (psychology, psychiatry, neurology, and social work). This type of care includes but is not limited to psychological screening and testing, psychotherapy and family therapy, and neuropsychological rehabilitation. Mental health services are any interventions assessment, diagnosis, treatment, or counselling offered in private, public, inpatient, or outpatient settings to maintain or enhance mental health or treat mental or behavioural disorders in individual and group contexts” (APA, 2022, para. 1).

South African history indicates how deplorable the mental healthcare system was during the apartheid era. During this period, the health and welfare services were distributed based on racial segregation, skewed towards providing quality services for the Whites (i.e., the minority) (Burke, 2006). The disparities in service distribution were worsened by policies of racial exclusion (van Rensburg, 2014). The case was similar for mental healthcare services. According to Bantjes et al. (2017), the apartheid system had a deleterious psychological and social effect on the oppressed population, resulting in social violence, emotional violence, trauma-related disorders, suicide, and substance abuse. Promoting access to mental health services was mainly disregarded, leading to many untreated mental health problems.

In the last 20 years, South Africa has attempted to consolidate the healthcare system, including mental healthcare, into one that equally caters to its diverse population (Docrat et al., 2019). As an initial step towards that direction, the post-apartheid system introduced several amendments in healthcare policies to improve healthcare service delivery to the marginalised population, such as the National Health Plan and White Paper policy. The purpose of the White Paper was to inaugurate a policy framework to steer the introduction and implementation process of new policies and legislation designed to revolutionise the South African public service (Maphumulo & Bhengu, 2019). The National Health Plan proposed the necessary reformation of the national health system to remove the division of services by incorporating all health services. Another objective was to develop inclusive, community-based healthcare available to all South Africans by establishing primary healthcare facilities (Hlongwa & Sibiya, 2019; Kautzky & Tollman, 2008).

The guidelines of the primary healthcare approach aim to empower people through equal delivery of quality health services that are sustainable and accessible to all citizens. According to Dookie and Singh (2012), primary care concerns services offered by general practitioners, nurses, and other related health professionals. Primary healthcare is considered the first point of entry into healthcare, focusing on preventative interventions for individuals and families. The benefits of primary healthcare include comprehensive health promotion services, prevention of illnesses, early detection and management of chronic illnesses, and prompt referral to secondary care (i.e., hospitals) for continuity of care (Hlongwa & Sibiya, 2019). The post-apartheid policies also delineated a path towards improving access to mental healthcare through integrating these services into primary healthcare, despite barriers such as poor socio-economic circumstances.

Consequently, the democratic government of South Africa established a strategy to decentralise and integrate mental healthcare into primary healthcare centres. The strategy was outlined in the first post-apartheid policy guidelines for mental health and later in the Mental Health Care Act of 2002 (Petersen et al., 2009). According to Burns (2008), the Mental Health Care Act of 2002 was established based on the following principles:

- The human rights of the mental healthcare user (MHCU) are as necessary as that of the welfare of the general society.
- All healthcare practitioners are also considered mental healthcare practitioners (MHCPs) and must take some responsibility for mental health needs.
- Mental healthcare must be wholly integrated with primary healthcare.

- Mental healthcare users have a right to be treated closer to their homes and within their communities, to any extent feasible.

To improve the mental healthcare system in South Africa, the Department of Health also officially endorsed the National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan, 2013 – 2020 (NMHPF). Among other objectives, the NMHPF intended to advance the integrated primary mental health services approach, increase public awareness regarding mental health and promote the mental health of the South African population (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2019). Even though the NMHPF accentuated the significance of integrated primary healthcare services to increase accessibility and reduce the treatment gap of mental disorders, the delivery of mental health services still appears to be focused on psychiatric hospitals (SAHRC, 2019). The mental health budgets and the appointment of mental health professionals (i.e., clinical psychologists and psychiatrists) are still skewed towards psychiatric services (Pillay, 2019). There has been minimal improvement in achieving the objectives of the NMHPF due to the failure to distribute the necessary resources to provide mental health services (de Wee & Asmah-Andoh, 2022).

Regrettably, two decades later, the healthcare system of South Africa is still plagued with challenges as the majority of the population still lingers in poverty with limited access to mental healthcare services. The healthcare system is overburdened with inadequate resources. Currently, the healthcare system consists of the state-funded public sector, which provides services to a large population of at least 71%, and the private sector, which serves at least 27% of the population that can afford health insurance (Van Rensburg, 2021).

According to Docrat et al. (2019), the scarce resources to tackle mental health issues in the public sector are inadequately distributed, focusing on treating severe mental disorders and neglecting the primary healthcare system. This imbalance involves having few professionally trained mental health practitioners (i.e., psychologists) serving in rural areas. There is no balanced distribution of psychologists between urban and rural areas. Most psychologists in South Africa work in urban areas, with most of them offering services in private practice (HPCSA, 2017). The ratio of psychologists in South Africa is 2.5 psychologists per 100 000 of the population, and only 17% of professional psychologists are Black African, the majority being White (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022). Thus, the provision of mental healthcare services seems to mirror the apartheid system. The inadequate number of psychologists serving in disadvantaged areas is a critical hindrance in making mental healthcare services accessible to all South African citizens.

Hlongwa and Sibiyi (2019) identified the challenges in providing effective mental healthcare services, including the shortage of staff skilled in mental healthcare services and the misdiagnosis of mental illnesses. Other notable barriers towards a comprehensive mental healthcare system include limited budget allocated for mental health resources, unsatisfactory advocacy from mental health leaders and dilatory integration of mental healthcare into primary healthcare facilities (Strumpher et al., 2014). According to Nguse and Wassenaar (2021), as much as South Africa can be commended for establishing legislation and policies prioritising access to mental healthcare, more policy development and optimised implementation must be needed. Marais et al. (2020) and Pillay (2019) coincide that the absence of a feasible funding framework for mental health, excluding mental health personnel from policy development processes and barriers to implementing knowledge-based policies contribute immensely to the lack of a feasible funding framework for mental healthcare and the scarcity of mental health services.

The latest proposed strategy to reconfigure the South African healthcare system is the National Health Insurance (NHI) which is currently before parliament. The NHI is a health financing mechanism established to offer access to quality and affordable health services for every South African citizen, regardless of socio-economic standing (Roll et al., 2021). Similar to other previously proposed approaches, the NHI may accelerate the implementation of the national government's promise to improve accessibility and delivery of quality health services, especially mental health services (Kleintjes et al., 2021). As a result, the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) fully supported the proposal of the NHI, a nonpartisan and non-profit organisation representing psychology professionals in South Africa (psychologists, Registered Counsellors and psychometrists). In the consultation process that occurred in June 2021 regarding the proposed NHI, PsySSA proposed various vital considerations to assist in effectively integrating mental health into the NHI, regardless of the policy frameworks accompanying it. The key considerations included the following:

- a) The NHI must offer sufficient mental health services and assist in speeding up the implementation of the NMHPF as it recognises the significance of promoting and prioritising mental health.
- b) The NHI must promote community mental health and psychology practitioners to actively participate in programme development and support services for primary healthcare.

The latter-mentioned key consideration emphasised that Registered Counsellors have the potential to contribute immensely to providing and promoting preventative community-based mental health services. According to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (2019), at least three-quarters of all psychology professionals are White, with Registered Counsellors being the youngest and most representative of Black African practitioners. This representation of Registered Counsellors would be beneficial in extensively providing mental health services for the major population in South Africa. Black African psychology practitioners are often more likely to be preferred by African clients than professionals from other ethnic groups (HPCSA, 2017; Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022). Registered Counsellors are to be widely employed in the public health sector, as initially envisioned in the profession's development, and meet the needs of those with limited mental health services in South Africa (Fisher, 2017).

Having highlighted the state of the mental healthcare system in South Africa and its shortfalls in providing accessible mental healthcare, it is now essential to delve into the background and challenges surrounding Registered Counsellors. This profession was forged to bridge the gap existing in the mental healthcare system of South Africa.

2.3.The Registered Counsellor profession in South Africa

This section highlighted the background of the Registered Counsellor profession, the unemployment of Registered Counsellors, and their experiences concerning their profession.

2.3.1. The background of the profession

The Registered Counsellor profession is the entry-level category within the profession of psychology in South Africa that was lawfully introduced in December 2003 by the Minister of Health (Elkonin & Sandison, 2006). This professional category was developed to limit the shortage of mental healthcare services in disadvantaged areas, specifically in the primary healthcare sector. The Registered Counsellor profession involves four years of training in Bachelor of Psychology (B. Psych) at an accredited higher institution, including six months of supervised practicum. Upon completion, a written national professional board examination with a 70% passing mark is a requirement by the Board of Psychology for graduates intending to register with the HPCSA as Registered Counsellors. In terms of the Health Professions Act, 56 of 1974, to regulate the professional conduct of health practitioners in South Africa, professionals registered with HPCSA are liable to pay an annual fee as a prerequisite for practising any of the professions with which the Council is concerned (HPCSA, 2019). As a result, Registered Counsellors are liable to pay R1262.00 every year, and failure to do so may result in suspension and erasure of practitioners from the roll of practitioners (HPCSA, 2021).

Based on Elkonin and Sandison (2006), the process of forming the Bachelor of Psychology qualification commenced in March 1997 and proceeded until 1999, championed by the Professional Board of Psychology. According to HPCSA (2019), the primary purpose of the Registered Counsellor profession is to provide short-term psychological interventions to improve the well-being of individuals and groups in diverse communities of South Africa. The role of the Registered Counsellor is summarised by HPCSA as follows:

“The role of the Registered Counsellor is to extend psychological services and make them accessible to the diverse South African population. A Registered Counsellor conducts psychological and preventative interventions that focus on promoting and enhancing psychosocial well-being for individuals, families, groups, and communities” (HPCSA, 2019, p. 5).

Other categories exist within the discipline of psychology: clinical, counselling, educational, industrial, neuropsychology and research psychology. What differentiates Registered Counsellors from other categories of psychology is that they are psychological practitioners who conduct psychological screening, basic assessment, and mental illness interventions at a preventative level. They aim to prevent, promote, intervene, and appropriately refer clients for further evaluation. Concerning severe mental health challenges requiring long-term psychological interventions, Registered Counsellors must refer the cases to relevant professionals within the healthcare system, such as psychologists and medical practitioners. Fields of practice where Registered Counsellors can provide their services include educational settings, government departments, and non-governmental organisations.

In asserting the value of the Registered Counsellor category, Petersen (2004) acknowledged that it was prudent to introduce this category considering the scarcity of mental health services in disadvantaged areas. Considering the historical and enduring trauma for many South Africans still poverty-stricken, there is a need to increase access to valuable mental health services. Elkonin and Sandison’s (2010) study explored the efficacy of Registered Counsellors and observed that the Registered Counsellors in different placement sites had competency and perceived value. Pillay (2016) also affirmed that this category holds great potency to benefit under-resourced, neglected communities. However, there is evidence that the public sector has fallen short in utilising the Registered Counsellor profession, considering the failure to surmount the burden and prevalence of common mental health problems, such as depression, reported in primary healthcare sectors (Petersen et al., 2009).

Conversely, a study conducted by Rouillard et al. (2016) revealed negative views regarding Registered Counsellors' role in providing mental health services. The researcher pointed out that the Registered Counsellor category has an unclear scope of practice compared to other categories in psychology, which creates uncertainty about the profession's role, especially in multidisciplinary settings. This uncertainty has perpetuated a lack of recognition of Registered Counsellors in the healthcare sector, challenging the essence of the profession's inception. According to Pretorius (2012), the assumption that only clinical psychologists can effectively provide any health-related mental service exacerbates the lack of acknowledgement of Registered Counsellors in the healthcare sector. Consequently, other psychology-related professions turn to be viewed as substandard compared to clinical psychology. This idea spreads a misleading narrative that other registration categories in psychology cannot provide effective mental health interventions, especially the evolving Registered Counsellor profession.

Another negative view concerning Registered Counsellors is that undergraduates who were unsuccessful in getting into the Master's psychology program became Registered Counsellors as an alternative (Rouillard et al., 2016). This view creates a misguided impression that Registered Counsellors are less dedicated to their profession. The idea that every Registered Counsellor strives to be a psychologist is likely fictitious, as some Registered Counsellors are content with their role as mental healthcare practitioners (Joubert & Hay, 2020).

In addition, the lack of recognition of Registered Counsellors in South Africa has created perplexity in distinguishing this profession from the popular lay counsellor role. Lay counsellors are volunteers who provide psychosocial support in non-governmental organisations such as Lifeline. Unlike Registered Counsellors, lay counsellors hold no formal qualification in counselling and do not have formal experience in providing mental health services (The Psychosocial Support Centre, 2018). However, many Registered Counsellors have expressed concern about how they are commonly mistaken for lay counsellors by other professionals and the public. As a result, this further discredits the professional training and competence of Registered Counsellors as mental health professionals (Abel & Louw, 2007).

In short, there is an exigent need to promote and raise awareness about the role of Registered Counsellors by educating communities, professionals, recruitment agencies and key government sectors, such as the Department of Health. It is high time that Registered Counsellors seize every opportunity that would guide and define their profession rather than being viewed as the withering profession in Psychology.

2.3.2. The scourge of unemployment among Registered Counsellors

Rouillard et al.'s (2016) study on how Registered Counsellors perceived their role in South Africa revealed that most Registered Counsellors pursued their qualifications because of their interest in supporting individuals with mental health problems. However, participants expressed significant concern regarding limited employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors in the labour market. The discouraging high unemployment rate of Registered Counsellors has been a major concern since the inception of their profession. Elkonin and Sandison (2006) studied the experiences of the first cohort of Registered Counsellors who graduated from 2002 to 2004. The research intended to discover where the Registered Counsellor graduates were employed, how many wrote the national professional board examination and had registered with HPCSA, and their experiences attempting to secure employment as Registered Counsellors. Amongst 84 graduates who completed the degree, only 62 were interviewed. The researchers found that only 7% (6) out of 73.8% (62) graduates were employed within their profession, and others had opted for alternative fields such as Labour Relations (Elkonin & Sandison, 2006). The common themes that emerged in the study were lack of employment and recognition within the healthcare system.

Although the initial purpose of Registered Counsellors was to serve in the primary health sector, Kotze (2006), in a study of 23 participants, found that 39.1% of participants were employed as Registered Counsellors, and none were employed within the primary health sector. It became evident that a common unemployment trend continues to loom within the profession. Subsequently, Abel and Louw (2009) discovered that from their sample of 82 Registered Counsellors, only 46% worked as Registered Counsellors. Many were somewhat discouraged from finding employment within the profession—those fortunate enough to land employment ended up in non-government organisations or private practice.

Joubert and Hay (2020) conducted a study with 18 Registered Counsellors who trained in educational psychology from 2012 to 2016. The study revealed that 83% of these Registered Counsellors worked in educational positions, and 39% offered part-time counselling services. For most participants, being a Registered Counsellor merely served as a subsidiary title in their careers and teaching as their primary focus. Dark (2020) echoed that the difficult unemployment circumstances amongst Registered Counsellors compel them to find employment in other fields, such as teaching. In educational settings, Registered Counsellors encounter various challenges, including struggling with co-workers who do not fully understand the Registered Counsellor's scope of practice, creating a difficult work environment (Joubert & Hay, 2020).

According to Dark (2020), the services provided in educational settings by Registered Counsellors positively contribute to the overall well-being of students and learners. However, the challenge of Registered Counsellors working outside of their scope of practice due to a lack of resources hinders the profession from optimally rendering intended services in schools (Joubert & Hay, 2020). The role of Registered Counsellors is imperative in providing psychosocial support within the education system to manage the psychological and social problems encountered by learners. The presence of Registered Counsellors in educational institutions could achieve the mission of the profession to provide psychological support and promote psychosocial well-being.

A much more recent study conducted by Salt (2021) among 19 Registered Counsellors working in private practice explored the obstacles encountered by these Registered Counsellors in providing primary mental healthcare services to the diverse and disadvantaged communities in South Africa. The researcher discovered that the existing impediments to delivering primary mental healthcare services were linked to the lack of more relevant occupational opportunities provided by the government. The main challenge also identified was limited information about the profession and recognition by communities, government, and health professionals (Salt, 2021). The difficulties pinpointed by Salt (2021) echo the areas of concern highlighted by Elkonin and Sandison (2006), which have lingered for over ten years, with no measures taken to ensure that the Registered Counsellor profession lives up to its expectations. Despite having 2640 Registered Counsellors with HPCSA, this profession's true potential remains untapped. Many Registered Counsellors are left to endure the wrath of unemployment as "few posts are made available in hospitals, police, army, community mental health or education" (Elkonin & Sandison, 2010, p.95). Furthermore, Pillay (2016) revealed that some universities discontinued the training of Registered Counsellors due to their graduates' lack of employment opportunities. The Registered Counsellor profession continues to flounder, leaving graduates with few employment opportunities in their chosen profession, which concomitantly deprives disadvantaged communities of access to mental health services.

All the studies mentioned in this section outlined the lack of vacancies, limited information among professionals about the Registered Counsellor profession and the potential absence of resources to accommodate Registered Counsellors in the primary healthcare sector and educational settings. It is clear that from the onset, no thorough national research or marketing of the profession was conducted before allowing the first cohort of students to embark on the extensive and expensive training to become Registered Counsellors (Abel & Louw, 2007; Elkonin & Sandison, 2006).

2.3.3. Experiences of Registered Counsellors concerning their profession

Mashiane (2019) aimed to explore the life stories of Registered Counsellors and their reasons for choosing this particular profession. The researcher discovered that many participants became Registered Counsellors because they desired to assist people struggling with adverse life experiences. Other participants mentioned that their desire to support others emanated from difficult personal experiences and the experiences of those close to them. According to Savickas (2013), some individuals in professional counselling consider pursuing the profession after conquering major life problems. Many Registered Counsellors aspire to occupy a helping professional role that serves individuals struggling with mental health problems (Fisher, 2017). However, it has been identified that as much as Registered Counsellors are passionate about their profession, many continue to experience barriers to nurturing their professional growth caused by unemployment.

Vala (2017) studied the experiences of Registered Counsellors regarding their professional career development. The findings highlighted that most participants revealed experiencing anxiousness and lack of confidence in their profession during their career journey due to limited employment opportunities for their category. However, participants expressed being able to cope with the profession's challenges through spirituality, peer relationships and self-reflection to alleviate their stress (Vala, 2017). According to Myers et al. (2012), spiritual growth, self-care practices and strong social support are considered to be important adaptive aspects related to a better quality of life among psychology graduate students.

In the study conducted by Hayward (2015), some Registered Counsellors indicated being uncertain about their professional sense of belonging, not being acknowledged by psychologists and being unknown to the communities where they are supposed to develop their professional selves. Findings further indicated that Registered Counsellors experienced occupational regret and found it challenging if there was an impasse in their career paths. Regret is the emotion experienced by individuals when they hold a belief that experienced difficult circumstances would have been better if they had made different decisions in the past (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Registered Counsellors who expressed regret towards their profession because of unemployment also reported experiencing distress and frustration (Hayward, 2015). Occupational regret is linked to a decline in intrinsic motivation and adversely affects psychological well-being and functioning, which correlates with reduced life satisfaction (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Registered Counsellors with strong spirituality and identity formation who consider their profession a calling cope well with professional struggles by accepting difficult experiences as part of God's plan (Hayward, 2015).

Mogatosi (2020) explored how Registered Counsellors cope with the distressing experience of unemployment. Most participants viewed unemployment as negatively influencing their career goals and increasing financial distress. As unemployment is commonly identified as a source of distress (Achdut & Refaeli, 2020), some participants indicated applying communication, optimism, and social support as effective coping mechanisms to alleviate distress. Maladaptive coping mechanisms such as binge eating and substance abuse were also identified as strategies to alleviate negative emotions and stress (Mogatosi, 2020). Decreased control over life and social isolation may lead to maladaptive coping strategies resulting in a cycle of demotivation and unemployment (Amenyah et al., 2022).

Overall, studies highlighting the experiences of Registered Counsellors indicate the value of unpacking the experiences of Registered Counsellors. These studies provide an understanding of what impedes Registered Counsellors' professional growth and what can be done collaboratively with other health professionals to rescue the profession from its time of turmoil and stagnation. Unfortunately, unemployment is a significant challenge that hinders the professional and personal journey of Registered Counsellors. In other countries, the Registered Counsellor profession is in its infancy and experiencing various difficulties.

2.4. The Registered Counsellor profession in other countries

According to Rani et al. (2017), the counsellor profession is increasingly acknowledged in Malaysia. Counsellors are separated into two categories: legally registered with the Board of Counsellors, identified as Registered Counsellors, and not registered and known as Non-Registered Counsellors. Thus, registration with the board is imperative for ethical regulations and certification of Registered Counsellors. Registered Counsellors in Malaysia are exposed to several career opportunities in public and private organisations, such as counselling at schools, higher learning institutes, and psychology officers in different government sectors, defence institutions, hospitals, and many private organisations (Rani et al., 2017). Despite the increasing acknowledgement of the profession in Malaysia, counsellors experience challenges related to their professional scope of practice and job satisfaction. According to Johari and Amat (2019), the counsellor's scope of practice is misunderstood, especially in school settings. School counsellors usually report being assigned additional duties unrelated to counselling or their scope of practice. As a result, school counsellors usually indicate job dissatisfaction and doubt towards their competency.

According to Pelling (2013), counselling is an evolving profession that still requires legal regulation in Hong Kong and Singapore. As a result, there is limited information regarding

counsellors in Singapore and Hong Kong. Yuen et al. (2014) agreed that counselling in Hong Kong is yet to be developed into a recognised profession, especially in comparison with other established helping disciplines such as Social Work and Clinical Psychology. Among several helping professions, the public highly recognises and trusts social work due to its long history in Hong Kong (Yuen et al., 2014). As a result, there are limited employment opportunities designated specifically for counsellors. Many counsellors in Singapore are often found in private practice and prefer working solitarily, while only a few practice in public sectors and group settings (Pelling, 2013).

Registered Counsellors in Australia offer valuable services to individuals experiencing mental health problems (Parker, 2017). However, according to Bloch-Atefi et al. (2021), there is a lack of recognition and advocacy of the counselling workforce in Australia, which increases unemployment for Registered Counsellors. Trained and experienced Registered Counsellors frequently experience exclusion from employment opportunities even when they meet the requirements. O'Hara (2015) concurred that social workers and psychologists are often given preference by the federal government and medical schemes, exacerbating the exclusion of Registered Counsellors. Thus, the major challenge for the counselling profession in the Australian context is that it is not recognised in a way that improves practitioners' career paths (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021; O'Hara, 2015). Bloch-Atefi et al. (2021) ascertain that although there is an ongoing need for advocacy work, Registered Counsellors have the potential to contribute significantly to Australia's mental healthcare system.

Overall, the Registered Counsellor profession is in its developmental stages and facing various challenges, such as limited professional recognition and isolation from other psychology professionals. There is limited literature detailing employment trends of Registered Counsellors in other countries compared to the South African Registered Counsellor profession. The previously discussed literature highlighted unemployment as a significant challenge for Registered Counsellors in South Africa. Regrettably, unemployment is also a common concern among graduates in South Africa and other countries.

2.5. Youth and graduate unemployment trends in other countries

Globally, young graduates struggle to secure entry-level employment related to their qualifications (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). Unemployment has long been identified as an increasing problem for developed and developing countries. It is described as a condition of an individual within the working age (i.e., 15 years and above) who is capable

of working and actively searching for employment but unable to secure paid employment (ILO, 2020).

Obumneke's (2012) study on unemployed young individuals indicated that in Nigeria, youth unemployment is very rife with a negative ripple effect on the individual's well-being and the society entirely. The researcher ascribed the key reasons for youth unemployment in Nigeria to ineffective economic policy frameworks, misconceptions about technical and vocational training and inadequate educational planning. A recent study by Olorunfemi (2021) indicated that unemployment had remained a significant problem for the youth and graduates of Nigeria. The rising youth unemployment rate contributes to poverty and insecurity in the country, causing frustration and discouragement among citizens. The youth represent 60% of the Nigerian population, and 51.2% experience unemployment, including tertiary graduates (Olorunfemi, 2021). Akor et al. (2021) attributed the increasing graduate unemployment rate in Nigeria to the shortcomings of the university curriculum tailored towards stereotyped careers that lack practical work and vocational skills. There is a mismatch between the produced tertiary graduates and available employment opportunities. Measures to address the challenge of youth and graduate unemployment need effective policy implementation, a review of the tertiary curriculum, and a supportive environment that can significantly decrease unemployment and poverty (Akor et al., 2021).

Youth unemployment statistics in Greece are among the high-ranking throughout the European Union (Kanellopoulos et al., 2021). According to Remeikiene et al. (2020), the challenging experience of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is a dominant issue of public debate in Greece, and a substantial number of young unemployed individuals are tertiary graduates. The distinction between tertiary education and lower education graduates is that the unemployment levels of the former mentioned usually decrease at an acceptable rate a few years after graduation compared to the latter (Kretsos, 2014). A study by Rapanos and Kaplanoglou (2010) suggested that the crisis is not youth unemployment *per se*, but a challenge of transition from educational training to the labour sector, regardless of age and graduation status. Remeikiene et al. (2020) argued that reducing youth and graduate unemployment requires the government to direct efforts into resolving labour market concerns, such as the reluctance of companies to employ inexperienced young individuals in first entry-level jobs. Furthermore, self-employment needs to be encouraged to resolve the perennial problem of youth unemployment because regardless of limited work experience, individuals can gain experience and enter the labour market (Remeikiene et al., 2020).

According to Mogomotsi and Madigele (2017), despite the relatively good economic performance, Botswana's rate of unemployment among graduates has increased rapidly in the past. Tertiary institutions produce graduates who need matching employment opportunities to accommodate them. Diratitsile (2022) noted that the increasing youth unemployment rate in Botswana results from a lack of appropriate skills for the available employment opportunities in the labour market. As a result, the private sector uses mismatched skills as the basis for its failure to employ young graduates in the working class. Mogomotsi and Madigele (2017) posit that the rising youth unemployment reveals that the education system needs to adequately prepare graduates for real-world employment regarding skills, attitudes, and expectations. The government in Botswana introduced short-term programmes such as internships for graduates to gain experience and skills. However, there is a need to establish other effective long-term measures to tackle the problem of employability and skills shortage (Mogomotsi & Madigele, 2017). Diratitsile (2022) emphasised the demand to strengthen existing youth empowerment programmes to provide skills and entrepreneurship development, work principles and professional mentorship.

According to Katumo (2019), there has been increased uncertainty and complexity in the employment sector that calls for urgent measures in Kenya as the policies developed to reduce the high youth unemployment rate have been futile. Vocational training institutions developed to skill the youth and increase their access to the labour market have not yet succeeded in curbing youth unemployment (Katumo, 2019). Ochieng et al. (2019) posit that the increasing unemployment rate indicates a lack of success in equipping graduates with employability skills, technical mastery and essential work-related competencies. Although a growing number of vocational and tertiary institutions aim to provide the youth with sustainable skills, graduates continue to encounter difficulties in joining the labour market (Ochieng et al., 2019). Ponge (2013) accentuated that the employment sector requires other skills, such as negotiating, networking, problem-solving, and an ability to manage the employment process rather than functional skills, such as qualifications in mathematics.

In different countries, youth unemployment is attributed to ineffective unemployment policies, lack of employability skills, skill mismatch, and lack of appropriate work experience among tertiary graduates. There is a need for the government to establish flexible labour market policies that convince private sectors to create more employment opportunities that can accommodate the youth and graduates. Based on the literature, youth and graduate unemployment is a consistent challenge for different countries, especially those in the African continent. Unemployment trends in South Africa mirror that of other African countries.

2.6. Unemployment among the youth and graduates in South Africa

In South Africa, the unemployment rate has accumulated to an alarming 33.9%, and the youth (15 – 34 years) unemployment rate reached a high rate of 46.5% in the second quarter of 2022 (Stats SA, 2022). The high unemployment rate among the youth is increasingly considered a national emergency in South Africa (De Lannoy et al., 2018). It is becoming a norm for South African youth to experience difficulties seeking employment opportunities. Mseleku (2022) stated that the statistical data revealing the susceptibility of youth unemployment in South Africa also indicates that graduate unemployment would continue to escalate in conjunction with the overall unemployment rate.

Education has been perceived as a vital weapon against unemployment in South Africa. According to Mavunda (2022), there has been an increase in students enrolling in higher education to increase their chances of securing sustainable employment opportunities. The graduate labour market in South Africa refers to individuals with a diploma, bachelor's degree, professional degree, or post-graduate qualification obtained from higher education institutions (Kraak, 2010). According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2021), student enrolments in public higher education institutions improved by 28.3% from 2009 to 2019. In the same period, graduates increased by 52.6% (76 516), with 45 196 graduates being undergraduate degree holders. However, an existing contention asserts that despite the rapid growth in acquiring educational qualifications, South Africa's education system fails to create the anticipated employment outcomes (Mncayi & Meyer, 2022). Graduate unemployment is linked to poor quality education, a shortage of required employment skills, a mismatch between qualifications and opportunities in the labour market and stagnant economic growth in South Africa (Mavunda, 2022; Tshishonga, 2022).

According to De Lannoy et al. (2018), policy analysis indicates that there is enough focus on the development of policy frameworks tackling the unemployment problem in South Africa through programmes such as the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA) (Brynard, 2011; Levinsohn, 2008). Most policy frameworks the government has endorsed emphasise objectives to increase economic growth, skills development, and employment creation. However, there has been barely any affirmation and implementation of the policy objectives, a lack of responsibility for youth development programmes, and shortfalls in the revised post-apartheid education system by the South African government (De Lannoy et al., 2018). The South African employment setting is still plagued with adverse influences of the apartheid legacy that contribute to the high unemployment rate among

disadvantaged youth (mainly Black Africans). Factors such as skill shortages and employment equity affect the supply of accessible employment opportunities for young Black African graduates (Coetzee & Esterhuizen, 2010).

Furthermore, De Lannoy et al. (2018) suggested that more attention should be paid to developing interventions that would support young work seekers (18 – 35 years) and minimise employment barriers, financial costs and distress encountered by the youth while seeking employment. Coetzee and Esterhuizen (2010) also suggested that providing career guidance to young graduates transitioning to the employment workforce and being significantly socio-economically disadvantaged might improve their potential to navigate the labour market and enhance job-seeking behaviours. Job-seeking is a purposeful and self-managed dynamic process characterised by a goal-oriented behaviour towards securing employment (Wanberg et al., 2005). According to van Hooft et al. (2021), the change in the job-seeking behaviour occurring as the process continues is a consequence of a multifaceted interaction of the individual's propensities, determination to secure employment, and distinctive personal and social circumstances. In unemployment policy developments and interventions, it is also critical for the South African government to emphasise the provision of career counselling to young graduates ready to join the labour market. Career counselling can empower young graduates with the necessary skills to successfully transition and adjust to employment settings.

Overall, the unemployment struggle in South Africa is a psychosocial burden on young unemployed graduates and hinders improving their quality of life. Determination to continue seeking employment fluctuates when new goals are developed, feelings of discouragement are experienced, and a lack of social support from significant individuals is prevalent (van Hooft et al., 2021; Wanberg et al., 2005). A strong dedication to attain employment continuously met with negative outcomes may be detrimental psychosocially (Griep et al., 2012). This negative experience may require various coping strategies to be ameliorated.

2.7. Conceptualising coping and psychosocial well-being

This section highlighted the concept of coping, coping resources by Hammer and Marting, the construct of psychosocial well-being, the correlation between unemployment and psychosocial well-being, and coping with unemployment. The section also discussed the theoretical frameworks underpinning the current study.

2.7.1. The concept of coping

Coping is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as demanding or exceeding the resources of the

individual (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002). The most important meaning of coping involves using different coping strategies in the face of adversity, which may refer to cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses to stress (Stanislawski, 2019).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that definitions of coping must include various efforts to manage stressful events regardless of the outcome. This statement means that no strategy is considered inherently better than any other. A strategy's efficacy is determined only by its effects in each encounter and its effects in the long run. As a result, coping serves two significant purposes: dealing with or modifying adverse experiences (problem-focused) and regulating the emotional response (emotion-focused) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping involves defining the problem, finding solutions, and learning new ways to cope with stressors, whilst emotion-focused coping concerns strategies to regulate stress, such as seeking emotional support, avoiding the stressor, or engaging in alcohol intake (Krohne, 2002).

In the context of unemployment, problem-focused coping may include activities dedicated to solving the problem of being unemployed, such as job-seeking, and behaviours that encourage job-seeking practices, such as skills development and volunteering. Emotion-focused coping may include altering how stress is experienced without altering the reality of unemployment. This coping strategy can involve seeking emotional support, accepting one's situation, or engaging in substance abuse in some unfortunate cases. Schonfeld (1990) also defined coping as a behaviour that can shield an individual from being psychologically affected by difficult social experiences. Coping concerns any response that helps prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress caused by external life stressors. Further, Schonfeld (1990) suggested that studying coping in the context of people's difficulties and the possible emotional effect is vital.

Positive psychology also emphasises the importance of applying positive coping strategies to help individuals to foster positive emotional states during unemployment. Promoting positive emotional states, optimism, resilience, interactions, and meaning of life is crucial in surmounting the adverse effects of unemployment on psychological well-being (Dambrun & Dubuy, 2014). Coping strategies such as optimism and resilience promote positive daily life behaviours that effectively increase the ability to cope with adverse life experiences and improve optimal functioning. According to Di Fabio and Palazzeschi (2015), resilience is a vital individual attribute that refers to an individual's ability to overcome adversity using a range of resources that allows them to convert adverse experiences into opportunities for

personal development. Resilience often accentuates a positive reflection of an individual's strength to accomplish satisfactory outcomes under challenging circumstances.

2.7.2. Coping resources by Hammer and Marting

This study conceptualises the various coping strategies using Hammer and Marting's (1988) Coping Resources Inventory (CRI). The authors acknowledge the role of coping resources in mediating one's experience of stressful occurrences. They identified five coping resources that may enhance individuals' ability to manage stressful events such as unemployment. All five coping resources are briefly discussed as follows:

- **Cognitive resources**

Cognitive resources refer to the extent to which people maintain a positive sense of self-worth, a positive outlook towards others, and optimism about life in general. Optimism is considered a successful coping strategy for unemployment and positively influences well-being (Du Toit et al., 2018).

- **Social resources**

Social resources refer to supportive relationships with friends, family, or others. These are primarily based on social relationships that can provide relevant support in times of stress. For example, unemployed individuals who value various social support systems are less affected by financial distress, anxiety, and discontent. Lorenzini and Giugni (2011) emphasised that there are noticeable positive effects of the closest circles of support, like partner support, family support, and friendship support, during difficult times of unemployment.

- **Emotional resources**

Emotional resources refer to the ability to identify, communicate and manage stressful emotions. According to Daderman and De Colli (2014), emotional resources enable a person to accept and express all kinds of affect, based on the idea that a range of emotional responses helps reduce the long-term negative consequences of stress.

- **Spiritual resources**

McSherry (2000) described spirituality as the desire to identify meaning and purpose in life, which results in a sense of fulfilment. These are based on the individual's actions guided by the firm and unswerving values derived from their religious, familial, cultural tradition, or personal philosophy. These values may bring sense and meaning to stressful events and propose strategies that allow the individual to respond effectively.

- **Physical resources**

Physical resources refer to individuals' practices of health-promoting behaviours considered to improve physical well-being. These practices may include taking care of the body by eating healthily, getting adequate sleep, and exercising.

The coping resources include the bio-psychosocial needs of human well-being. Physical resources represent the biological component, cognitive and emotional resources form the psychological component, and social and spiritual resources represent the social component of well-being. Bio-psychosocial adaptive competencies allow the individual to uphold and preserve self-identity in times of unemployment. The availability of coping resources lessens distress and preserves balance in people's psychological and social well-being.

2.7.3. The construct of psychosocial well-being

In research, psychosocial well-being encompasses physical, economic, social, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Psychosocial well-being is an eminent multidimensional construct incorporating psychological, social, and subjective aspects that influence an individual's holistic functionality (Kumar, 2020). An individual's well-being consists of coping with several daily living stressors and signifies one's ability to realise their full potential as a valuable member of society (Kumar, 2020).

Defining psychological well-being is a complex endeavour, as can be explained in many ways. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), psychological well-being denotes interpersonal and intrapersonal levels of positive functioning, including one's relatedness with others and self-referent attitudes that include personal development. From the positive psychology perspective, psychological well-being is viewed as hedonic or eudaimonic (Fredrickson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic well-being emphasises satisfaction with life and the extent of positive affect associated with personal achievements such as employment and financial stability, including material possessions and gaining more career opportunities (Ryan & Deci, 2001). On the other hand, eudaimonic well-being emphasises the importance of attaining psychological actualisation. Eudaimonic well-being involves having a purpose in life and having a meaningful existence as an individual, indicating the quality of life (Fredrickson et al., 2013). Eiroa-Orosa (2020) maintains that quality of life is related to psychosocial well-being because it involves emotional, social, and physical components.

Social well-being and quality of life are mainly described as a collection of components, including objective living circumstances and subjective well-being (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020).

Studies focusing on well-being often include social contact and interpersonal relationships, accompanied by available social resources. Some studies prefer to focus on social problems such as poverty, social exclusion, and social inequality. Thus, positive social well-being is frequently linked to social life matters. For instance, in some cases, individuals with positive social well-being would be considered well by considering that they hold a deep-rooted sense of belonging and have firm social bonds and support systems (Blanco & Díaz, 2006; Fredrickson et al., 2013).

2.8. Correlation between unemployment and psychosocial well-being

A considerable amount of literature has focused on the potential effect of unemployment on individuals' psychosocial well-being. The research proposes that experiencing unemployment is related to outcomes of psychosocial problems such as depression, suicide ideation, anxiety, financial strain, social isolation, and physical illnesses (Wanberg, 2012).

Notable progress in the literature relevant to understanding the correlation between unemployment and psychological problems emerged from Paul and Moser (2009), who conducted a meta-analytic study indicating that unemployment correlates with distress and may be a causal factor. Paul and Moser (2009) reviewed the outcomes of 237 cross-sectional studies comparing the psychological well-being of employed and unemployed individuals. Long-term unemployment at a young age indicated more detrimental effects of unemployment, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicide. McGee and Thompson (2015) stated that there is a high risk of depression among the unemployed than among employed young adults (aged 18 to 25 years), and the matter should be deemed a public health concern. The findings of this study suggest that unemployed young adults are more likely to report depression when compared with their employed peers. Kunze and Suppa (2017) stated that unemployed individuals who experienced adverse effects concerning social activities often resorted to leading private lives as they tended to find displeasure in social contact. Social withdrawal is considered one of the significant symptoms of depression. Furthermore, depression appears to have substantial consequences on young adults, possibly influencing the enduring effects of recurrent depressive episodes in their lifespan (Kunze & Suppa, 2017).

A meta-analysis of the relationship between unemployment and emotional and physical well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005) attests that unemployment is related to decreased emotional well-being (e.g., stress) and increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches). Well-being deteriorates when people lose employment but improves when people change from being unemployed to being re-employed. De Witte et al. (2012) concurred that negative affective

experiences of unemployment relate to reduced self-esteem, disengagement from society, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Thus, the absence of employment is expected to negatively affect psychosocial well-being as a significant causal relationship exists between unemployment and psychological well-being. Achdut and Refaeli (2020) suggested that long-term unemployed individuals bear a significant burden of psychological problems compared to those who experience unemployed for only a short time, as the burden of illness worsens with the duration of unemployment.

Bartelink et al. (2020) identified that psychological problems related to unemployment during young adulthood and lack of financial security result in more psychological problems further into adulthood. McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) discovered that financial resources significantly influence individual well-being during unemployment. Financial stress was negatively related, and social support was positively related to the psychological well-being of unemployed participants. Pohlan (2019) maintained that economic deprivation due to unemployment and social isolation is strongly associated with psychosocial problems. Achdut and Refaeli (2020) concur that unemployment is closely associated with intense psychological distress, as financial strain and loneliness during the unemployment crisis increase distress.

According to Kunze and Suppa (2017), an individual's unemployment scourge commonly deteriorates life satisfaction and lowers social participation due to a general discouragement effect. Pohlan (2019) stated that unemployed individuals are likely to downgrade their lifestyle and restrict financial spending, influencing their engagement in social and cultural activities. Paul and Moser (2009) further specified that the adverse effects of unemployment on psychological well-being were more extreme in developing countries with an ailing economy, disparity in income distribution and lack of firm employment policy frameworks.

The connection between psychosocial problems and unemployment demands collective attention from individuals, families, and policymakers (McGee & Thompson, 2015). Graham et al. (2019) accentuated that it is essential to consider that graduates may experience the transition to work and adulthood differently and that individuals might face different challenges in securing employment. Developmental dynamics may influence how graduates individually experience unemployment. For instance, uncertainty associated with the transition to adulthood and shifts in social relationships and support structures may influence unique unemployment experiences among graduates as emerging adults (McGee & Thompson, 2015).

According to Fergusson et al. (2001), suicide, substance abuse, and poor quality of life due to unemployment among the youth are closely related to psychosocial problems such as

heightened stress levels and poorer life satisfaction. Power et al. (2015) emphasised that experiencing psychosocial problems at a young age poses a risk of other psychological disorders that are prevalent later in life, such as dementia. Fergusson et al. (2001) further revealed that unemployment contributes to increased involvement in criminal behaviours and substance abuse due to a lack of adequate coping resources among young people.

Accordingly, unemployment is regarded as a psychosocial and economic challenge that requires a comprehensive set of effective coping strategies to improve and maintain sound psychological well-being during adverse experiences. Coping resources such as social support, personality, financial resources, and the ability to structure one's time as an individual play a vital part in enhancing and maintaining psychosocial well-being during unemployment (De Witte et al., 2012).

2.9. Coping with unemployment

South Africa has established various governmental and non-governmental programmes designed to promote work-related skills among graduates. However, the high unemployment rates show an increased need for other effective interventions to emphasise and strengthen the importance of psychological well-being and coping skills during unemployment.

Du Toit et al.'s (2018) study on exploring the unemployment experiences of South Africans living in townships indicated that optimism was predominant among participants even though they lived in a poverty-stricken environment with scarce employment opportunities. With resilience, participants perceived their adversities as opportunities to learn life lessons, grow and strive toward a better future. Ogueji et al. (2021) revealed that unemployed individuals utilise more positive coping strategies such as participating in activities, optimism, and relaxation to reduce distress. According to Achdut and Refaeli (2020), perceived trust, optimism, and a sense of control reduce psychological distress. Thus, understanding the positive coping strategies of other unemployed individuals is critical in order to support those individuals experiencing psychological distress or psychological problems as a result of unemployment.

A study conducted by Waters and Moore (2002) suggested that involvement in leisure activities that are meaningful and purposeful can be a beneficial coping response during unemployment. Particular types of leisure activities fulfilled satisfactory effects to buffer the negative experiences of unemployment, while some activities appeared to have a shortfall. Du Toit et al. (2018) observed that participating in purposeful leisure activities appeared to relieve the stress associated with unemployment. Unemployed individuals engaging in physical leisure

activities such as sports or exercising produced more satisfactory coping outcomes than passive leisure activities such as reading and watching television (Waters & Moore, 2002). Unemployed individuals are likely to gain positive health effects from physical activities to prevent boredom, structure their daily life and distract themselves from stressful unemployment experiences. Physical leisure activities provide time structure, increase social contact, and improve psychosocial well-being (Du Toit et al., 2018).

Mogatosi (2020) explored how Registered Counsellors manage to cope with unemployment. Concerning different coping methods, participants identified communication, optimism, and social support as effective coping mechanisms. According to Amissah and Nyarko (2020), positive social support experience and valuable contact with family are critical for unemployed young individuals concerning financial and social support. Social support in social relationships offers significant interpersonal resources beneficial to the unemployed.

Registered Counsellors apply various coping strategies during their professional training, including rationalisation, self-reflection, normalising their experiences, positive self-talk that fosters self-efficacy, and supportive relationships that increase motivation (Vala, 2017). The researcher further suggested that there is a possibility that Registered Counsellors apply similar coping strategies during difficult times like unemployment. According to Machatela (2013), individuals in the field of psychology are likely to employ diverse coping strategies during adversities due to their psychology-based knowledge. These strategies include positive self-talk, interpersonal relationships, personal therapy, self-reflection, religious/philosophical beliefs, and exercise.

Hayward's (2015) study on exploring the spirituality and identity formation of Registered Counsellors revealed that participants considered being Registered Counsellors as a calling and some participants could cope with unemployment through spiritual beliefs and accepting their challenging circumstances as part of God's will (Hayward, 2015). According to Hirschi (2011), a calling is thought to influence commitment and driven career behaviour. As a result, individuals who identify as being called to a profession may improve their commitment to the profession despite impediments and lack of accomplishments.

Coetzee and Esterhuizen (2010) explored the relationship between psychological career resources and coping resources in a sample of young unemployed African graduates. Their findings indicated that participants mostly used cognitive and spiritual abilities to cope with unemployment. The study highlighted that psychological career resources and coping resources of unemployed young graduates (20 – 24 years) should be considered when

intervening in their unemployment crisis (Coetzee & Esterhuizen, 2010). Ismail (2017) echoed that graduates' capacities to become employable, confident, and withstand difficult experiences are fundamental in producing proactive, knowledgeable, employable graduates. Graduates should not merely hold qualifications but also develop and present a combination of personal qualities, knowledge, and practical experience.

Overall, the effects of unemployment reverberate across all levels of human functioning. It is a dynamic circumstance that is survived through various coping strategies and available resources. Several ways of coping have been linked to positive well-being outcomes among the unemployed. There is an existing correlation between unemployment and distress. However, the intensity of the distress can be alleviated by using different adaptive coping strategies to improve psychological well-being.

The adverse effects of unemployment on psychological well-being and how people cope with stress have been explained by various theories. The most influential theories are Jahoda's (1982; 1987) Latent Deprivation Model and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Both theories are discussed extensively in subsequent sections as the theoretical frameworks that underpin this study.

2.10. Theoretical Frameworks

A theoretical framework is a logically elaborated and connected set of concepts and assumptions proposed from one or more theories to support the study (Varpio et al., 2020). To establish a theoretical framework, the researcher describes concepts and approaches that would ground the research and logically relate these concepts to the study. Theoretical frameworks focused on providing an understanding of the current study and anchoring the study's research objectives. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was used to understand how Registered Counsellors cope with unemployment, and the Latent Deprivation Model was used to understand how unemployment affects their psychological well-being.

2.10.1. Latent Deprivation Model

According to Jahoda (1982), employment serves universally significant psychological needs during adulthood, which is why the absence of employment is expected to negatively affect psychological and social well-being, regardless of the individual's setting. The Latent Deprivation Model states that unemployment deprives people of manifest functions (e.g., income) and five latent functions of employment: time structure, collective purpose, social contacts, social status, and activity.

- **Time structure**

Time structure represents an opportunity to fill one's time or days with planned productive activities. The absence of such a structure interferes with the individual's well-being. Days can sometimes be perceived as too long when there is nothing to engage in, resulting in boredom and time-wasting (Du Toit et al., 2018).

- **Collective purpose**

Collective purpose denotes feeling valued and needed by others (Selenko et al., 2011). It is experiencing the feeling that the tenacities of collectivity go beyond that of an individual. Collective purpose is where individuals draw their life meanings and purposes. Therefore, if there are obstacles to attaining meaning in life, a sense of purposelessness emerges and causes distress.

- **Social contacts**

Social contacts define the interpersonal relations outside the family, which cannot be substituted merely by strengthening family life. They offer more prospects of other individuals' decision-making and rational appraisal with their various views and meanings of life. Thus, engaging in a broad, diverse social sphere is vital to psychological well-being. A workplace is highly likely to provide such context.

- **Social status**

Social status defines one's social position relative to others in the social hierarchy is considered a social status (Neubert et al., 2019). It is commonly formed by the value systems in the society where one resides, and it is known as one of the basic constructs of a person's identity. Even a low social status can be deemed more satisfactory than an entire absence of status in society, which is how some unemployed individuals frequently experience their situation (Kunze & Suppa, 2017).

- **Activity**

Activity is considered one of the vital elements of an individual's psychological well-being in the Latent Deprivation Model. Being active is more suitable for a person's psychological well-being than being passive. Unemployed individuals who devote most of their time to household responsibilities and leisure activities and spend less time idling have better psychological well-being (Waters & Moore, 2002).

In some instances, individuals obtain latent functions from sources other than employment but only to some degree. For instance, religion, political activity, or leisure activities offer certain latent functions but not in a way that is equivalent to employment. Therefore, most unemployed people are likely to experience deprivation of at least half of the latent functions and experience a decline in psychological well-being. This model emphasises that unemployment would have a negative psychological effect, especially if unemployed individuals fail to find other ways of achieving the five latent functions mentioned.

2.10.2. Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is applied in this study to understand how Registered Counsellors respond to and cope with negative unemployment experiences. This model ties cognitive appraisals, coping resources, and coping strategies to illuminate the correlation between stressful environmental events and the individual's response. Coping strategies are commonly classified as problem-focused or emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping strategies signify individuals' active attempts to reduce their stress. In contrast, emotion-focused coping strategies are directed at regulating emotional problems and emotionally escaping from or avoiding stressful situations.

The core assumption is that stress is an individual situation interaction based on subjective cognitive views that emerge from the interaction between the individual and the environment (Jiang & Probst, 2016). An individual's perception of self-worth and perceived control of life experiences are essential forecasters of the coping process. Individuals evaluate the stressful situation and then employ coping strategies available depending on intrapersonal (e.g., positive beliefs) and environmental (e.g., social support) coping resources (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002).

The effect of unemployment on individual experience can show a discrepancy from extremely adverse effects, such as depression, to positive effects, such as leisure time. Unemployment can negatively and positively affect the general well-being depending on the individual's coping strategies (Virkes et al., 2017). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping strategies employed in the face of adverse experiences such as unemployment are efficient in nurturing well-being. Coping is more effective if there is a balance between the unpredictability of the stressful experience and applying proper coping strategies to the stressor. It would be a mistake to overlook that some coping strategies applied during a stressful event can be deemed damaging and non-productive.

2.11. Conclusion

This chapter provided the literature review on the mental healthcare system of South Africa, the background of the Registered Counsellor profession, and the rate of unemployment among graduates in relation to psychosocial problems and coping strategies. This chapter further highlighted the most influential theories in the context of coping with unemployment, which constituted the theoretical frameworks underpinning the current study. Chapter Three presents the research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provided a detailed description of the research methodology adopted in this study that aimed to explore the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in the South African context. This chapter discussed the research approach, research design, research paradigm, study setting and the selection of participants. The chapter further discussed the data collection method, data collection instrument(s), data collection procedure, data analysis, the study's trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethical considerations. The discussion culminated in elucidating the rationale for utilising these particular research components.

3.2. Research approach

According to Guest et al. (2013), the qualitative approach does not generalise findings to a larger population and permits the researcher to probe into the participants' personal stories. The qualitative research approach gives prominence to exploring and understanding the meaning an individual or people ascribe to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). This approach was imperative as the study aimed to gain in-depth information from the participants and provide an overview of how Registered Counsellors experience unemployment in the South African context and how it affects them.

The qualitative research approach typically involves methods such as interviews and observations to evaluate individuals' experiences that are subjective in nature and non-statistical (Guest et al., 2013). Furthermore, this research approach allowed flexibility between the researcher and the interviewee, mainly when using open-ended questions. As a result, the researcher gathered open-ended information to explore the participants' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences about the topic of interest. The qualitative research approach has its basis in the phenomenology paradigm and is concerned with understanding experience (Neubauer et al., 2019).

3.3. Research design

A research design is an inquiry that offers directions for procedures in research and provides a pertinent framework for the study (Creswell, 2014). In line with the researcher's interests and research processes, the phenomenological research design was adopted to guide the research process. The phenomenological research design is found within the qualitative approach, which appropriately fits the study based on the research questions and the phenomena to be explored

by the researcher. Phenomenology focuses on the individuals' lived experiences within the world (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The phenomenological research design aims to describe what phenomenon was experienced and how individuals experienced it. This research design explores the layers of interpretation to uncover the experience as it unfolds in people's first encounters and involvement in a situation (Neubauer et al., 2019). The phenomenological research design provides in-depth descriptions and interpretations of the research participants' lived experiences through the analysis of significant statements concerning how the phenomenon has affected their lives. In phenomenological research, the analysis of significant statements generates meaning units and develops the essence of the descriptions applied (Creswell, 2014). The phenomenological research design is appropriate for the current study as it holds strong philosophical underpinnings in eliciting in-depth information using interviews and describing the lived experiences of individuals. The phenomenological research design aligns with the study's aim to explore individual experiences of how unemployment affects Registered Counsellors through the descriptions imparted by the participants.

3.4. Research paradigm

A research paradigm is how one views the world and comprises certain philosophical assumptions guiding thinking and behavioural processes (Mertens, 2019). Based on Asenahabi (2019), a researcher must understand which research paradigms are implicated within the study to acknowledge the part the researcher may play in the research process and outcomes.

The current study utilised the interpretivism research paradigm. According to Kankam (2019), the interpretivism paradigm assumes that reality is subjective, constructed by social actors and people's perceptions. This research paradigm further assumes that as individual perspectives and experiences are subjective, social reality may vary and hold multiple perspectives. Wahyuni (2012) elaborated that the interpretivism research paradigm acknowledges that individuals' varied backgrounds, assumptions and experiences contribute to the continuous construction of reality existing in their broader social context through social interaction. As the current study aimed at seeking in-depth knowledge of the participants' unemployment experiences, the interpretivism research design was adopted because it supports an interactive dialogue with the studied participants. The interpretivism research design relies on questioning and observation to decode meanings of social constructs and generate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Kankam, 2019).

3.5. Study setting

The study took place in the South African context. South Africa is among 42 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and is considered dominant economically and politically. Perhaps most noticeably, the South African context is exceptionally diverse and far more heterogeneous, with an estimated population of 60 million encompassing four racial categories: White, Black, Coloured, and Indian (Stats SA, 2021; Tewolde, 2021). The country has eleven official languages recognised in its democratic constitution: English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Ndebele, Zulu, Tswana, Sepedi, Swati, Sotho, Venda, and Tsonga. English is predominant in official, educational, and formal business spheres. However, all languages are spoken to varying degrees in different regions.

Furthermore, South Africa comprises nine provinces in developed urban and under-developed rural areas (Masenya, 2021). Participants in the current study were from Limpopo, Gauteng, Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal. They spoke different languages, including Xhosa, Zulu, and Xitsonga. However, English was mainly used during the interviews to minimise the language barrier.

Contemporary South Africa depicts a highly unequal society with high levels of inequality, mental illnesses, poverty, unemployment, and other socio-economic issues that continue to affect most of the population (Masenya, 2021). Regarding unemployment, 32.9% of the country's labour force is unemployed, with the youth accounting for 59.5% of the total unemployed people, irrespective of educational level (Stats SA, 2021). Concerning the current study, the Registered Counsellor profession exists within this South African context and its socio-economic issues. Registered Counsellors are tertiary graduates who are not immune to the burdens of unemployment encountered by the youth of South Africa.

3.6. Study population

According to Hu (2014), the study population is a subset of the targeted population from which the sample is selected, as researchers are rarely able to study the entire target population. A thoroughly and precisely described study population improves the completed study's validity (Eldredge et al., 2014).

An average of 240 Bachelor of Psychology graduates register annually with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) to practice as Registered Counsellors. Based on current statistics, there are at least 2640 Registered Counsellors in South Africa (HPCSA, 2021). According to HPCSA (2017), the Registered Counsellor category has the youngest age profile, with an average ranging from 25 – 30 years and the strongest representation from Black

Africans. The age range indicates that Registered Counsellors fall under the youth category in the South African context. In line with the aim of the study, the targeted population was Bachelor of Psychology graduates between the ages of 21 – 35 years who qualified as Registered Counsellors between 2014 and 2021 with HPCSA. The population of interest must have experienced unemployment in the South African context.

3.7. Selection of participants

Purposive sampling was the primary technique applied to acquire participants for the study. Purposive sampling searches for information-rich sources (Lapan et al., 2012). This process entailed finding and choosing individuals who particularly experienced the topic of interest. Availability and willingness to participate were crucial in the sampling process. The sample was selected based on the following inclusion criteria for accessing in-depth and rich data from selected participants.

- The participants must have completed an undergraduate degree, specifically a Bachelor of Psychology (B. Psych).
- Registration with the HPCSA between 2014 and 2021.
- Fluency in English was required to limit the language barrier.
- They must have been unemployed or have experienced unemployment for at least six months after registration with HPCSA.
- The participants must have been between 21–35 years.
- The participants could be from any province in South Africa.

Since the study was not interested in statistical analysis, a small sample was used rather than a large sample. Matters surrounding appropriate sampling size in qualitative studies are highly subjective and determined by factors such as data saturation. In qualitative studies, the concept of saturation informs data collection. When further data collection does not provide new narratives on the phenomenon being explored, saturation has been achieved (Mason, 2010). The principle of saturation was applied as the ultimate criterion to determine the sample size in the current study. Saturation was reached in the sixth interview, and the researcher proceeded to eight interviews to ensure that no new information was overlooked. Charmaz (2006) opined that a small study with modest claims might attain saturation more promptly than a study aiming to describe a process that spans disciplines.

Among fourteen participants interested in the study, eight met the criteria and were selected—the participants who were not B. Psych graduates or registered with HPCSA and those who could not commit to their interviews were excluded. The selected participants were between the ages of 23 – 34 years, falling under the youth category. The periods of unemployment accumulated to several years for some participants, six years being the longest period and six months being the shorted period.

The researcher advertised the invitation to participate in the study on Facebook, a social media platform with groups such as the *Registered Counsellors and Psychometrists and Related*. This strategy was a successful alternative attempt to recruit suitable participants. Strict guidelines were followed to verify all participants through the HPCSA iRegister with their permission to ascertain that they were registered under the Registered Counsellor category.

3.8. Pilot study

According to Williams-McBean (2019), a pilot study is a small-scale study that precedes the primary investigation to assist the researcher in undertaking necessary improvements for the study. A pilot study guides the researcher in improving research instruments, evaluating the feasibility of recruitment procedures, collecting preliminary data and pre-empting potential challenges in data collection and analysis (Ismail et al., 2018). Williams-McBean (2019) further outlined that in a phenomenological study, a pilot study enables the researcher to bracket personal bias, thereby maintaining the study's trustworthiness.

In the current study, the researcher conducted the pilot study with two participants from the targeted population utilising the data collection techniques to assess feasibility and efficacy. The pilot study involved two individual telephonic semi-structured interviews, which were then disposed of. Through the pilot study, the researcher was able to refine and add more relevant questions in the semi-structured interview schedule and estimate how much time the interviews were likely to take. Furthermore, the researcher was able to improve interviewing and note-taking skills during the interviews with the participants.

3.9. Data collection method

The most frequently used data collection method in a qualitative study is in-depth interviews to amass participants' lived experiences in a detailed and insightful manner (Creswell, 2014). In-depth interviews typically entail a dialogue between the researcher and the participant, directed by a non-rigid interview procedure and accompanied by follow-up questions, probes, and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semi-structured individual interviews were used in the current study as a data collection method. According to Whitehead and

Whitehead (2016), individual interviews permit participants to recount their experiences openly and the researcher to be responsive to individual differences and situational circumstances.

The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted telephonically with the participants to elicit their experiences as Registered Counsellors and how they cope with unemployment in South Africa. The semi-structured individual interviews enabled the researcher to ask open-ended questions and gather open-ended information to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences about the topic of interest. Whitehead and Whitehead (2016) emphasise that although semi-structured interviews guide the interview process, they are adaptable enough to enable the researcher to probe and pursue areas of interest.

Concerns about utilising telephones and online platforms for qualitative interviews are predominately directed to a possible negative influence on the richness and quality of empirical data collected by telephone compared to face-to-face interviews (Drabble et al., 2016). However, telephonic interviews present an increased level of anonymity likely to foster participants' interaction during the interview. Other concerns regarding telephonic interviews include the inability to respond to visual cues and building rapport (Farooq & De Villiers, 2017). In the current study, efforts to build rapport were established through a telephonic interaction with the participants before the interview to confirm their availability and provide a brief understanding of the interview process. However, it is important to acknowledge the potential loss of non-verbal visual data from the participants during the telephonic semi-structured individual interview as the researcher was unable to use body language as a natural tool for probing and seeking clarifications or elaborations to responses provided. Visual cues inform the researcher when it is necessary to motivate and stimulate the participant's interest (Farooq & De Villiers, 2017). The use of clarification skills, active listening, concentration, ensuring participant engagement and natural flow in the conversation assisted the researcher in building rapport during the interviews and maintaining the quality of data collection. Adopting a conversational style and reading questions in a conversational tone to create a naturally free-flowing conversation allowed the participants to share their in-depth unemployment experiences as Registered Counsellors. Furthermore, the telephonic semi-structured individual interviews proved logistical convenience with better access to geographically dispersed participants, flexibility for scheduling interviews and reduced costs. The researcher only compensated the data bundle cost for all participants.

3.9.1. Data collection instruments

The researcher used a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix C) with twelve open-ended questions to guide the telephonic semi-structured individual interview process. The semi-structured interview questions in the interview schedule were added and refined after the pilot study to improve data collection. Questions were directed at the obtained qualification, unemployment experience, employment search, perceptions about the Registered Counsellor profession and the coping strategies applied during unemployment. According to Dangal and Joshi (2020), open-ended questions allow the researcher to probe further, obtain immediate clarification, and expand the participants' responses when necessary. The researcher applied iterative questioning, which involved returning to the material previously mentioned by the participant to obtain related data through rephrased questions (Shenton, 2004). This type of questioning allowed participants to reflect on their unemployment experiences and often utilised coping strategies. Note-taking and audio interview recordings were used to assist the researcher in identifying the themes that emerged throughout the interview sessions. The recorded data was transcribed by the researcher for data analysis purposes.

3.10. Data collection procedure

The course of data collection took approximately three weeks. The invitation to participate in the study was advertised on Facebook, a social media platform with groups such as the *Registered Counsellors and Psychometrists and Related*. The invitation highlighted the criteria for desired participants. Potential participants were instructed to provide their email addresses to receive further information about the study. Participants who met the criteria for participation were verified through the HPCSA iRegister to corroborate their registration with the council.

Selected participants completed their biographical information (see Appendix D) to provide relevant personal information and provided convenient dates for their interviews. The researcher emailed the electronic versions of the informed consent and biographical information documents to the selected participants. All participants were contacted telephonically a day before their interviews to confirm availability and receive brief information about the research process.

The researcher organised semi-structured interviews telephonically according to the availability of the participants. All interviews were conducted in English, as participants indicated fluency in English. However, most participants also used their native languages (IsiZulu, IsiXhosa and Xitsonga) to convey expressive responses and articulate their

experiences. Squires (2008) purports that allowing participants to respond in their primary language increases their comfort level and willingness to participate in the study. Hence, the researcher could also obtain richer data from native language responses. The researcher has discourse and grammatical competence in the above-mentioned native languages. As a result, the responsibility of overcoming language barriers was adhered to, and the integrity and credibility of translated qualitative data were duly maintained.

The semi-structured individual interviews took approximately 30 – 45 minutes and were audio recorded with the participants' permission. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were notified about their rights as participants in the study. They verbally consented as a declaration that they fully understood the documented informed consent and the details of the research process. During the interviews, follow-up questions, iterative questioning and probing were often applied to clarify specific responses or gain additional information from the participant (Dangal & Joshi, 2020).

Minimal connection problems were experienced in some interviews, a common challenge with telephonic and online platforms. However, all participants were knowledgeable about online platforms and took the initiative to minimise connection problems, such as having sufficient data and a stable network connection. Shortly after the interviews, participants received their data compensation. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, secured, and stored using the Folder Lock Pro application in a password-protected laptop and folders.

3.11. Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is described as systematically examining and organising the interview transcripts, notes, and other non-textual data the researcher gathers to improve understanding of the topic of interest (Wong, 2008). The data analysis method used in this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible data analysis strategy used to generate and analyse interview themes. It can be described as a method of identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

When using thematic analysis, it is crucial to consider two levels of themes: semantic and latent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semantic themes are centred on articulating the participant's words without providing an interpretation. In contrast, the latent level explores beyond what the participant has said and proceeds to examine the underlying assumptions and conceptualisations informing the semantic content of the data.

The thematic analysis approach followed the six-phase model to identify, describe, and interpret patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the six-phase model consists of a thematic map that strategically plans out the facets of the developing analysis. The primary purpose is to identify the main themes, subthemes, and how they are connected to the research questions. The researcher utilised the six phases of thematic analysis, namely familiarising herself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was applied as follows:

3.11.1. Phase one: Familiarising yourself with the data

Phase one involved the researcher immersing herself in the data by reading and rereading the transcribed data from the interview recordings and listening to the audio recordings. It was valuable for the researcher to reread the interview transcripts before beginning the coding process. The researcher noted the words often repeated by the participants to observe patterns formed.

3.11.2. Phase two: Generating initial codes

Phase two initiated the systematic data analysis through coding. Codes were the building blocks of the analysis that identified and provided interesting data features significant to the research questions. The researcher used a coding document (notebook) to generate initial codes and create the initial list of ideas about how the data address the research questions. The researcher coded the data by drafting notes and utilising highlighters to indicate potential patterns.

3.11.3. Phase three: Searching for themes

Searching for themes involved shifting codes to form themes. A theme portrays something imperative about the data concerning the research questions and represents some patterned response or meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process entailed the researcher sorting the different codes into potential themes and organising all of them in a meaningful structured way. The researcher combined the potential themes to form overarching themes concerning the research questions.

3.11.4. Phase four: Reviewing potential themes

Phase four involved reviewing the developing themes in relation to the coded data and the whole dataset. This phase was primarily based on quality checking of distinctive and coherent

sets of themes that have been gathered. Revising was key to creating additional themes and discarding unnecessary themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The researcher reviewed whether the themes were coherent and meaningful and addressed the research questions and objectives. Finally, the researcher was certain that relevant themes had emerged from the data.

3.11.5. Phase five: Defining and naming themes

Phase five involved defining the themes and clearly stating what is unique and specific about each. This phase shaped the analysis into its fine-grained detail. The themes were named in an informative and concise manner. Furthermore, the researcher confirmed if the themes are connected to the study to form a thematic map. The researcher was responsible for ensuring that the themes held a coherent narrative representing the participants' perceptions and experiences.

3.11.6. Phase six: Producing the report

Phase six involved thoroughly writing a report. The report aimed to offer a convincing narrative about the analysed data. Themes were presented sequentially to create a logical connection and meaningfully tell a coherent story about the data. Producing a report allowed the researcher to review the whole data analysis process and collect even more data to achieve saturation.

3.12. Trustworthiness of the study

Ensuring that the information collected is trustworthy in a qualitative study is necessary. In producing findings that closely reflect and represent the meanings described by the participants, trustworthiness is imperative in qualitative research (Cope, 2014). According to Shenton (2004), concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability ought to be considered by qualitative researchers in pursuit of a trustworthy study. Thus, these concepts were discussed in this section concerning the current study.

3.12.1. Credibility

Credibility concerns the truthfulness of the data collected or the participants' perceptions, interpretation, and representation of them by the researcher (Cope, 2014). A qualitative study is credible if the descriptions of participants' experiences are relatable to other people who share similar experiences. Enrichment of credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research involves adopting well-established research methods, in-depth data collection and the researcher's reflective commentary (Shenton, 2004). In line with the qualitative research approach, the researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews as a data collection

method. Appropriate selection of participants through purposeful sampling was maintained to ensure that the participants selected had indeed experienced the phenomenon being explored in the study and met the selection criteria.

3.12.2. Transferability

Transferability is concerned with applicability, a degree to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied to other settings with other participants (Seale, 2011). To achieve transferability, the researcher provided exhaustive descriptions of the participants' selection, data collection and data analysis process to enable other researchers to apply the study findings to their settings. However, the current study is a small qualitative study. As a result, the findings may not be generalisable to other contexts. Furthermore, all the methodologies applied in the study are discussed in detail to offer the reader an understanding of how the research was conducted.

3.12.3. Dependability

Dependability concerns the extent to which the research findings are consistent if the study was to be repeated (Seale, 2011; Shenton, 2004). Dependability allows other researchers to study the transparency of the research process and validate the original study by reaching a similar conclusion. The researcher ensured dependability by providing a detailed research methodology section that other researchers can use as a guideline to conduct similar studies. The research methodology chapter provided a detailed description of the methods used in the current study, such as research designs, sampling methods and data collection procedures, and how they were applied in the study (Shenton, 2004). In addition, the researcher transcribed the audio-recorded interviews shortly after the interviews to prevent a lack of consistency in the data collection. The researcher applied note-taking during the research process, individual interviews, and data analysis to allow the researcher to reflect and differentiate between her assumptions and the data collected.

3.12.4. Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the degree of confidence that the research findings are based on the data collected from the participants rather than the researcher's biases (Seale, 2011). Confirmability is established through research methodology descriptions, reflexivity, and audit trail. An audit trail entails detailing the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Seale, 2011). The researcher ensured confirmability by clearly demonstrating the research process, how themes emerged from the data and how conclusions and interpretations were

reached. The findings presented in this study were generated through transcribing audio recordings and thematically analysing the data through data transcripts. Subsequently, the researcher confirmed the transcripts' accuracy by comparing verbatim transcriptions to the audio recordings so that the information was captured accurately. As some participants used their native languages to narrate their unemployment experience and respond to questions, the information was accurately translated into English to avoid losing original meanings.

3.13. Reflexivity

Reflexivity describes an ability to acknowledge that the researcher's beliefs, assumptions, and prior experiences concerning the phenomenon are likely to influence the research process (Cope, 2014). Reflexivity is a technique considered a crucial component in qualitative research. Engaging in reflexivity is a continuous endeavour during the research process that acknowledges the likelihood of bias in the study due to the researcher's stance and influence in the research context.

Considering that the researcher in this study is a Registered Counsellor, the researcher needed to reflect on her position during the research process. Firstly, the researcher recognises that her past experiences relating to the phenomenon may have influenced the research process. For instance, the researcher experienced long-term unemployment as a Registered, a similar experience to some participants in the current study. As a result, the researcher sought extensive supervision to evaluate the research design, questions, and data analysis. The supervisor objectively reviewed the results of the current study to ensure neutrality and limit the researcher's bias. Of paramount importance in the current study were the participants' experiences. Thus, all the researcher's personal observations, knowledge and beliefs about the phenomenon were recorded in a reflexive journal.

3.14. Ethical considerations

In a qualitative study, ethical considerations hold significance due to the in-depth nature of the study process. Arifin (2018) appraises qualitative researchers of the responsibility to ensure participants' willingness to participate in the study, protect the participants' identity throughout the research process, and disseminate transparent and trustworthy research reporting without deception to readers. Regarding this study, the following ethical considerations were considered:

3.14.1. Obtaining ethical clearance from relevant bodies

A proposal for this study was submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) for review. The ethical clearance application

was uploaded on the UKZN RIG system, reviewed by the school academic reader, and approved by the ethics committee (Appendix A). Approval was granted in November 2022 (reference number: HSSREC/00004927/2022).

3.14.2. Obtaining informed consent from the participants

The researcher emailed the informed consent document to the participants and provided detailed information about the current study before conducting the semi-structured individual interviews. Before the beginning of the discussions, the participants provided verbal consent. They confirmed that they thoroughly read and understood the contents of the informed consent and the nature of the research study. The researcher ensured that all the participants consented to participate in the research voluntarily. Permission to audio record the interviews was also requested before the interview commenced. Furthermore, participants were notified about their right to terminate participation at any stage of the research process.

3.14.3. Ensuring confidentiality

Ensuring confidentiality refers to managing information that the participants have disclosed with the expectation that it would not be divulged to a third party without permission (Burke et al., 2014). Regarding maintaining confidentiality in this study, participants chose pseudonyms for themselves prior to the individual telephonic interviews. The pseudonyms were utilised to identify and refer to the participant during the individual interviews. Subsequently, code numbers were allocated according to the sequence of interviews and assigned to each participant. For instance, *participant 1* in this study was interviewed first. The code numbers were used to identify the participants' consent forms, interview transcripts, audio recordings, data analysis, and report the study's findings. Any information that could potentially reveal the actual identity of the participants was eliminated from the study, as all participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality.

The audio interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a USB with password-protected folders using the Folder Lock Pro application. Folder Lock Pro is a data security application that allows the user to password-protect any sensitive information in any electronic device (NewSoftwares.net, 2020). The data would be securely stored for five years after completion of the study and only accessible to the researcher and the researcher's supervisor.

3.14.4. Maintaining non-maleficence and beneficence

In adhering to ethical considerations, the researcher duly maintained the protection of participants from physical and psychological harm throughout the research process. The

researcher directly or indirectly brought no harm to the participants, either physically or psychologically. The researcher consulted with the UKZN Psychology clinic to refer participants for counselling services should the need arise during the interview process.

3.15. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research methodology that guided the research process of this qualitative study. The researcher utilised literature evidence to substantiate critical decisions made during the research process and to provide the rationale for the suitability of the research design, the data collection process, data quality, the data analysis approach and ethics considered. The following chapter presents the findings of this study, highlighting specific themes that emerged from the data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presented the research findings constructed from eight qualitative semi-structured interviews detailing the participants' subjective unemployment experiences. The present study sought to explore the unemployment experiences of Registered Counsellors, how they cope during unemployment, and their perceptions of factors contributing to their unemployment. Through thematic analysis, four themes and nine sub-themes were identified. The chapter first described the five participants who were individually interviewed. Subsequently, the themes and subthemes that emerged during the interviews were discussed in depth.

4.2. Description of the participants

Table 4.1. Participants' description

<i>Participant Code</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Province</i>	<i>Year of Completion</i>	<i>Year of Registration</i>	<i>Duration of Unemployment</i>
<i>Participant 1</i>	32	Black African	KwaZulu-Natal	2011	2014	Six years
<i>Participant 2</i>	31	Black African	Gauteng	2016	2020	Two years
<i>Participant 3</i>	23	Black African	Limpopo	2021	2022	Six months
<i>Participant 4</i>	30	Black African	KwaZulu-Natal	2013	2014	Four years
<i>Participant 5</i>	34	Black African	KwaZulu-Natal	2017	2019	Three years
<i>Participant 6</i>	30	Black African	Eastern Cape	2014	2016	Six years
<i>Participant 7</i>	23	Black African	Limpopo	2021	2022	Eleven months
<i>Participant 8</i>	25	Black African	Eastern Cape	2019	2021	Seven months

Table 4.1 summarises the participants' biographic information according to age, race, South African province, year of completing the B. Psych degree, year of registration with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), and duration of unemployment. For each participant, the unemployment duration included all unemployment periods experienced after registration with HPCSA. Code numbers were allocated according to the sequence of interviews and assigned to each participant. For instance, *participant 1* in this study was interviewed first. The code numbers were used to identify the participants in the data analysis and the report of the study's findings.

All participants provided important information during the individual in-depth interviews, highlighting their experiences during unemployment and how they managed to cope. The semi-structured interview questions supported the enquiry process. However, there was a variation in the sequencing of the questions due to the participants' answers and the peculiarity of experiences. A summary of themes and sub-themes and a detailed discussion is presented.

4.3. Summary of themes and subthemes

Table 4.2. Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Theme one: Subjective experiences of unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Job-seeking – a difficult experience</i> • <i>Experiencing psychosocial challenges</i> • <i>Emotions experienced towards the career choice.</i>
Theme two: Perceived factors contributing to unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Availability of vacancies</i> • <i>The profession – Lack of recognition and advocacy.</i>
Theme three: Coping with unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Exploring alternative opportunities</i> • <i>Leisure activities</i> • <i>Resilience and optimism</i> • <i>Social support</i>
Theme four: A way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession	

4.4. Theme one: Subjective experience of unemployment

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that participants actively engaged in job-seeking, which they considered a difficult experience. The participants intimated that they experienced various challenges during unemployment, which made them develop feelings of regret towards their career choice, while some expressed being content. Furthermore, participants intimated other various psychosocial challenges, which were captured in subsequent subthemes, as portrayed in Table 4.2.

4.4.1. Job-seeking – a difficult experience

Participants described job-seeking as a complex and stressful experience, mainly when they consistently apply for employment and receive no responses from employers. This lack of communication brought feelings of discouragement. Participants narrated their job-seeking experiences, how they have felt, and the challenges they have encountered as difficult experiences. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

‘I’ve been applying and applying. The problem is that when they advertise the post, they want someone with five years of experience. Where am I going to get that? So yeah, it’s very difficult. And I have also applied in the private sector, but even there, they want someone with relevant experience, and I don’t have that’ (Participant 2).

‘Even when looking for opportunities, there aren’t any opportunities. Not that I don’t qualify for them, but opportunities for Registered Counsellors were not there’ (Participant 8).

Some participants expressed physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from their job-seeking activity, which is heightened by long periods of rejection and unemployment in the South African economy. The participants shared the following;

‘The time is running out; the year is ending: you apply here and there for internships and so forth, and there is no response. You start feeling like that was a total waste of time’ (Participant 1).

‘It’s tough because in 2014, I was in Joburg, and I tried to apply consistently without missing an advert, but I didn’t get anything until 2015 when some guy who had a private practice hired me, and that was it up to 2017, and then from there I have never worked as a Registered Counsellor. It’s just bad’ (Participant 4).

“It is very tiring to look for a job, yeah, especially in South Africa. You know, the issue of finding employment is very hard, and I think, as from now going forward, the problem is escalating” (Participant 5).

“It was frustrating to wake up in the morning and go through emails and find approximately 5 to 10 emails saying that we cannot proceed with your application” (Participant 7).

4.4.2. Experiencing psychosocial challenges

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that experiencing unemployment erodes an individual's personal, social, and psychological well-being. The participants have intimated how unemployment has created financial distress, deprived them of social participation, and perpetuated feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, and low self-esteem. The narratives have revealed that the participants experience psychological and social effects of unemployment. Financial problems and restricted social life were the predominant psychosocial challenges experienced by the participants. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“Yeah, it’s really frustrating. It’s frustrating. You just don’t know how to deal with it. If you know, for instance, I’m the firstborn, you are supposed to be helping out at home, you have a child, and yet your mom still has to help you out. It’s truly frustrating” (Participant 4).

“Unemployment is very frustrating. I could see that it is affecting me a lot psychologically because when you do not come from a rich family, you study because you have hope. You are expected to change the situation back at home. Then when you stay too long without finding a job, it becomes difficult because you feel like a failure somewhere somehow” (Participant 6).

“I would say to a certain degree it was frustrating because I have studied. I have completed my degree and even registered. Now I had to pay the annual fees knowing very well that I am unemployed” (Participant 8).

Therefore, participants 4 and 6 expressed frustration and lamented that unemployment delayed them from achieving their desired life goals and deprived them of an opportunity to fulfil their family obligations. Participants 1 and 7 further unveiled low self-esteem, loneliness, and depressive symptoms as the adverse psychological effects experienced due to lack of employment. The participants shared the following;

“When you are unemployed, I mean you are alone at home, you've got nobody to rely on [...]. Even your self-esteem lowers, you feel guilty as if maybe you did something wrong” (Participant 1).

“Before I could volunteer, it took a period of a month, and I was not well. I was depressed. I was sleeping the whole day, and I would cry sometimes, not knowing the reason at all” (Participant 7).

Therefore, financial distress and deprived social participation are the outright consequences of unemployment. Most participants bemoaned their lack of financial stability, deprived social engagement and loss of friendships. This is further supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“I don't socialise anymore because I feel like if maybe you are going out with friends who are working, who do have money, they are expecting you to pay your bill at the restaurant and you don't have money. So, yes, it has affected me a lot. I have no source of income, and then yeah, that also affects your mental health. It's difficult, very difficult” (Participant 2).

“It has affected my social life because there are certain things that you can't do, your friends are going out, and at the end of the day, you are not going to accompany them because you do not have money” (Participant 3).

“If you are not working, people undermine you most of the time. So, it really affects you if you are not working. It affects even your social life because you find that you cannot connect with other people who are working. You will concentrate only on other problems because you know when you speak to them, they will think you need their financial help. Yeah, that's the issue if you are not employed” (Participant 5).

“When it comes to friends, unemployment causes a Psychological problem because you relate with friends that are employed. But you then feel like you no longer belong to them. You no longer speak the same things because they would talk about work when you are unemployed. So, I think it is much related to social life because you end up leaving your friends and feel lonely” (Participant 6).

4.4.3. Emotions experienced towards the career choice.

The findings from in-depth interviews revealed that participants experience mixed emotions towards pursuing a degree in Psychology instead of other courses that are presumed to have

better employment opportunities. Some participants regretted their career choice while still having a passion for psychology. One participant shared the following;

“I do regret it, although I feel like it’s a calling. I still want to do it.”
(Participant 2).

Some expressed regret stemming from imagined alternative possibilities that they would have achieved if they had opted for different careers. The participants shared the following;

“It’s like you see this Psychology profession of yours and imagine that, with all those things, you were wasting your time. You should have done teaching. So, you end up feeling like you are in doubt or maybe you made a bad choice from the beginning” (Participant 1).

“I feel like I regret it in a way. I regret it because I feel like it’s holding me back. If I did something else, I would be far in life. So, I do regret it. I regret it, not completely, but I regret it. So, if maybe I started with education and then maybe later on, I would be like, okay, maybe let me just do Psychology. I would still be in the field and then do school counselling and all that stuff since I would have a job. So, starting with B Psych for me, it’s a cause for regret” (Participant 4).

“It was really hard, actually. I even regretted why I chose this degree because I had a lot of options, but I decided to proceed with Psychology. After experiencing unemployment, I regretted it so much [...]. I was regretting it because social workers were getting jobs by that time, while I was stuck”
(Participant 6).

Some participants expressed being content with their career choice as they find the helping profession interesting and expressed willingness to continue pursuing their careers in counselling. The participants shared the following;

“I’m okay. I don’t regret doing it. I find it very interesting because you get to know yourself, get to understand why people actually react, and you get to also understand the cultural diversity that people get into” (Participant 3).

“No, I’m not regretting because B Psych was my degree. That was my dream [...]. I’m still looking forward to practising Psychology. Yeah, to continue

helping, to continue doing counselling people. I'm willing to continue with psychology” (Participant 5).

“Well, I fell in love with Psychology during my second year [...] If I had another chance to pick it, I would still go for Psychology” (Participant 7).

4.5. Theme two: Perceived factors contributing to unemployment.

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that participants believe there has been a shortfall in the labour market with regard to creating employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors. Also, the participants believe that the government has failed to disseminate information elucidating the Registered Counsellor profession to the public. As a result, there is confusion and a lack of awareness about the role of Registered Counsellors in the South African context. These sentiments are captured in the subsequent subthemes, as portrayed in Table 4.2.

4.5.1. Availability of vacancies

Participants have revealed that vacancies are limited for Registered Counsellors because some employers prefer social workers, Master’s graduates, and individuals with working experience for counselling opportunities. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“There are other posts that might be relevant to my field, but only to find that the posts are only offered to people maybe with social work” (Participant 1).

“In most cases, especially when looking for posts, you realise that some of the posts that belong to Registered Counsellors are given to social workers” (Participant 4).

“I feel like even the government itself has betrayed us. They want someone who has already done their Master’s degree. Sometimes not that they have done their Master’s degree only, but they should also have at least a minimum of three years of work experience. How can I have a minimum of three years if I graduated last year? So yeah, it is a bit unfair” (Participant 7).

Therefore, participants 1, 4 and 7 deplored the recruitment system indicating that employment opportunities relevant to Registered Counsellors are offered to postgraduate candidates and related helping professions such as social work. The participants expressed feeling disadvantaged in the labour market and their prospects of securing employment hampered. Some participants intimated that employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors had been limited, especially in the past years. The participants shared the following;

“I can't say I applied everywhere. Even the posts have been very limited when it comes to Psychology. I can't say I applied everywhere; I didn't have a place to apply to” (Participant 1).

“Way before there were no opportunities. Maybe before 2014, most Registered Counsellors were unemployed. Most of the ones I know even changed their qualifications” (Participant 6).

“None pertaining to the degree. I won't even say limited, but it was very scarce to even see posts that are looking for Registered Counsellors” (Participant 8).

Some participants intimated that some available positions requiring Registered Counsellors are underpaying, which may indicate that recruiters also undervalue the profession. Some participants bemoaned the lack of knowledge about the websites advertising relevant vacancies as a contributing factor. The participant shared the following;

“Recently, I saw a post in Cape Town, and I was telling my sister about it. Can you move to Cape Town for R6000 to R8000? That's the scale they are offering, and they want a Registered Counsellor” (Participant 4).

“I think most people don't know the sites or where to apply. Yeah, they don't know the sites [...] because if I can remember when I started applying, I realised that I was not aware of the many websites that are there for the applications. And as time went on, I did adapt to that, and there are these Jobindeed sites. There is also LinkedIn and other sources” (Participant 5).

On the other hand, participants highlighted that recently in 2022, government departments, including the Department of Health, Labour, and Education, have been advertising Registered Counsellor positions. The government might be finally gearing towards utilising the Registered Counsellor profession to its full potential. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“They have been advertising posts for Registered Counsellors, but before that, you would see a Registered Counsellor post maybe after two or three months, even after four” (Participant 2).

“Uhm, they are mostly advertised in the Department of Education in the Eastern Cape. In other provinces, I didn't see them. Maybe they are still coming. They are mostly advertised in the Eastern Cape by the Department of Health. I

also saw the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health. Even the Department of Labour, but they offer internships’’ (Participant 3).

‘‘There are a lot of them now, which I have applied for, and are related to Registered Counsellors. Some of them are from other institutions [...]. From August, or from May, there were ones that were from the Department of Labour’’ (Participant 5).

‘‘Currently, there are a lot of vacancies. As you can see, the Department of Health is releasing contract posts and the Department of Labour as well. Other private companies now employ Registered Counsellors and Psychometrists. So, there is a big difference than before’’ (Participant 6).

4.5.2. The profession – Lack of recognition and advocacy.

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that participants believe that employers, the public and other professionals do not acknowledge and understand the profession. As a result, this contributes to their unemployment. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

‘‘I think, in my opinion, the organisation are not aware of what role we really have to play there. Even as Registered Counsellors, we do provide counselling, but we are hardly recognised for counselling positions. They rather prefer social workers other than me as a counsellor. There's limited recognition of the profession’’ (Participant 1).

‘‘So, I feel like we are not recognised as Registered Counsellors here in South Africa. It's like only a few people are aware that there are Registered Counsellors who can do counselling as well. Well, it's not all things that Psychologists can do, and we are close’’ (Participant 4).

‘‘Currently, at the moment, I think it is the lack of recognition that hinders employment’’ (Participant 8).

Therefore, participants 1, 4 and 8 shared their views regarding the lack of recognition of the Registered Counsellor profession in the South African context and professional settings. The participants intimated that the lack of knowledge about their role in the healthcare sector and the services they provide contributes to limited employment opportunities. Some participants expressed that there is a lack of awareness about the Registered Counsellor profession in

communities and organisation settings. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“I feel like people are not aware of the field that we are in” (Participant 3).

“I think some people do not understand the work of a Registered Counsellor. Most people understand Psychologists, you know and social workers. Sometimes if you work at an NGO or non-governmental organisation, you will find that people will call you a Psychologist, but you know that you are not a Psychologist” (Participant 5).

“People are not aware of what Psychology is [...] they don't even know anything called mental illness or health. I'm from the deepest rural areas. There are educated people there, academics around, but even them, they don't even know. So, I would say no, people are not aware of Registered Counsellors or anyone who did Psychology. So that knowledge is still needed. People confuse social work with Registered Counsellors” (Participant 7).

“Too many people actually lack the information about the profession, and I don't think it is well marketed [...]. So, you will find that there are some instances whereby someone from another profession is actually doing what you are supposed to be doing because they don't know someone with my qualifications. So, our duties end up being assigned to someone else” (Participant 8).

Some participants attributed the lack of employment to the shortfall in marketing the profession to relevant stakeholders and organisations that could benefit from the services of Registered Counsellors. The participants further emphasised that Registered Counsellors should also introspect as they might contribute to unemployment. One participant shared the following;

“I think it's not marketed well at all in institutions where the posts are supposed to be available” (Participant 6).

“Here is another challenge for us, and personally, I also do blame myself. We isolate ourselves in the corners. I blame myself, too, because after being a Registered Counsellor, I didn't go out there and practice. So, this prevents us from getting a chance and a place as Registered Counsellors in the communities” (Participant 6).

4.6. Theme three: Coping with unemployment

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that unemployment is a critical experience requiring viable coping strategies to alleviate and navigate. Participants narrated several ways of coping during unemployment, including physical activity, social support, resilience, optimism and exploring alternative opportunities.

4.6.1. Exploring alternative opportunities

Exploring alternative opportunities is viewed as a problem-focused coping strategy to reduce the negative experiences of unemployment. In a bid to secure employment and improve their lives, the participants sought employment in fields unrelated to their career of choice. The participants intimated that while actively job-seeking, they also make means to acquire additional skills, pursue other career choices and find alternative employment opportunities to sustain themselves. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“I was working in the clinical research field [...]. It was something completely different because when they advertised the post, they just wanted someone with basic experience, especially with HIV. It was not related” (Participant 2).

“Well, so far, it’s a period of a year being unemployed, but I managed to get experience through volunteering, and then now I’m an educator assistant” (Participant 7).

“I worked as a teacher assistant [...]. Then it was the Department of Labour internship” (Participant 8).

Some participants expressed the need to consider an alternative career because of the challenges they encountered as Registered Counsellors. One participant shared the following;

“Okay, right now, I also started considering EAP. If things don’t go well, I was thinking of doing the EAP programme because I feel like it’s better than the programme that we are in or trained to do” (Participant 3).

Some participants intimated that they explored entrepreneurship as an interim solution to the complex unemployment problem. One participant shared the following;

“Yeah, I have a business here that I’m doing during the course of the week. I usually take my product because I’m selling health products, so I go to advertise

to people. I think business helped me a lot to cope with the situation''
(Participant 5).

In exploring alternative employment opportunities, other participants intimated that they accepted offers unrelated to their profession, some of which were underpaying. The participants emphasised that they took these employment offers to acquire a livelihood. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

''Whatever comes your way, you take it; you take whatever comes your way, to relieve the pressure [...]. I got to work at Old Mutual as a financial adviser, which has got nothing to do with my profession, but at least I was able to make a living out of it'' (Participant 1).

''I took the teacher assistant post because it was available where I stayed. So with that salary, you can't really sustain yourself when you must travel and then buy goods. But because it was available where I stayed, I had to take it. It was a means of making a living'' (Participant 4).

''I didn't get any job after my board exam. I even chose to go and look for some temporary jobs actually, and I got a job. I got a job as a cashier as well as a merchandiser. I didn't want to stay and wait for the day where Registered Counsellors could get more job opportunities. I decided to do what I can so that my life can continue'' (Participant 6).

4.6.2. Leisure activities

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that unemployment is likely to increase available time to engage in leisure activities. Most participants have revealed that they participate in leisure activities such as sports, hunting, walking, and exercising to relieve stress and pressure. Engaging in physical activity during leisure time has a therapeutic effect that tends to intensify social contact, maintain health, and increase optimism. Unemployed individuals who actively engage in leisure activities are more likely to be able to regulate some adverse effects of unemployment. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

''In the rural areas, we play soccer, hunt, and do all those things just to be part of the society. You end up doing things you do not enjoy simply because everybody does it. If everybody goes to the forest to hunt, you just need to take

your dogs and go too. Do whatever comes your way just to keep yourself busy, to release stress and pressure” (Participant 1).

“Well, exercising, I go out for walks, and also, I dance sometimes [...] I’m eventually planning that next year I will get busy with TikTok because I feel my mental health is being compromised. I also sing” (Participant 2).

“A friend of mine said I should join them; they are doing some sports. They go around doing sports in school. So, I think I will take the offer. Because keeping busy helps in dealing with this frustration, I want to do that now, involving in sports, we going to be going around in schools recruiting kids to be involved in sports and all those things” (Participant 4).

“The other thing that I normally do if I have a lot of stress is exercise. It is very important, yeah. I do some exercises, you know, in the afternoon. I think maybe in the late afternoon, maybe around 5 pm, I go to the field and go to play soccer with others” (Participant 5).

“I became involved in sport not necessarily because I was unemployed, but I have always loved sport. It really played an important role in shifting my focus on what I was going through that time” (Participant 6).

4.6.3. Resilience and optimism

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that participants felt optimistic about ultimately gaining employment and improving their lives. Some participants showed resilience despite persisting unemployment challenges. This optimism was mainly linked to the passion that the participants felt towards their profession. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“I don’t want to give up, and this is something that I love, although now I’m facing challenges, this is what I love” (Participant 2).

“Then you try to survive, you find ways to survive [...] so, at the same time, the field on its own is building you and your resilience to become patient. Even if in your life things don’t go the way you want them to go, be patient. So, it saves your life and how you think, how you react” (Participant 3).

“I haven’t completely given up on counselling or being a Registered Counsellor or maybe one day being a Psychologist [...] I try by all means to be content although sometimes it hits you that you are not where you are supposed to be, in most cases, I’m living within my means” (Participant 4).

“I also found a way to console myself by understanding that I will get an opportunity and things will eventually work out for me” (Participant 6).

“It was painful seeing my peers, people that I went to school with, working and earning their own money. It was frustrating. But knowing how strong I am for those temptations, I just said no, you know what, I’m going to be fine” (Participant 7).

4.6.4. Social Support

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed that social support from sources such as family members, friends or a professional counsellor is essential for mental health during unemployment. Some participants referred to their family and friends as their primary source of social support, which they utilised to offload and reduce distress. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“I manage stress because I feel like I have support at home. I feel like it’s one of the things that ease the stress because they are supportive. There is no day where you go to sleep without eating because your family is there, and they understand what you are going through. Even if things are not easy, they do understand. They don’t put pressure on you. I feel like yeah, the only thing that I use is the support I get from my family” (Participant 3).

“I talk a lot. I offload with my friends and with my cousins, I make sure. If I get an opportunity, I offload. So that’s mainly what I do. At some point, I did an online counselling session. I was doing therapy for myself so that I could just offload it. So, I make sure I let it out, and I try by all means that I don’t isolate myself, because I feel like that’s when things kick me the most when I’m isolated” (Participant 4).

“Support was there actually from my sisters” (Participant 6).

“Even family sometimes, even though I don’t really like to ask them a lot because already they’re struggling. So yeah, they were helping, and I really

appreciate their support. Maybe that is the other reason why I didn't feel the unemployment because people were supporting me. They were very, very supportive” (Participant 7).

“As for me, there is my family for any social support that I need. Also, there is one friend I’ve got. So, I knew that whenever I felt distressed, I could talk to her. Mostly my way of coping is talking to people” (Participant 8).

4.7. Theme four: A way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession

Having narrated their unemployment experiences and the ripple effect they have on their psychosocial facets of life, participants shared their views on what can be done to promote their profession and on how Registered Counsellors can equip themselves to combat unemployment. Participants emphasised the need for Registered Counsellors in public sectors such as clinics, hospitals, schools, and the Department of Social Development. This is supported by the following responses from in-depth interviews:

“There is a need for counsellors to be in the local clinics because you find a whole lot of people at the hospital that I was working at because they only have one Psychologist. And then, when that person goes on maternity leave for four months, there are no psychological services rendered. At least if they can give us posts at clinics and hospitals, it will be much easier” (Participant 2).

“If we are going, to be honest, a Registered Counsellor should be placed almost everywhere. Like in schools, there should be a counsellor there. In public departments, there is nothing” (Participant 4).

“I think the government still needs to create more opportunities. For example, Registered Counsellors are only expected to get opportunities from the Department of Health. But there are other departments, such as the Department of Labour, although they have started with internships. Social Development is supposed to have Registered Counsellors as well” (Participant 6).

Some participants highlighted the importance of Registered Counsellors equipping themselves with online counselling skills, self-employment, and seeking opportunities in relevant sectors. The participants shared the following;

“Registered Counsellors need to align themselves with the present times, especially with the technology issues. I know most of the Psychologists and

Registered Counsellors are still doing in-person counselling where the clients will come to your private practice, and they will do the services. They must start now and familiarise themselves with online counselling because we are now living in times of technology” (Participant 5).

“Don't wait for employment to come to you. Create employment. Take the opportunity where you are, and it does not have to be money-wise. Just do what you love, where you are, to help someone else. Not just Registered Counsellors, but everyone who is unemployed, who graduated” (Participant 7).

“I do believe there is a future for Registered Counsellors. We, as Registered Counsellors, need to educate the society and knock on relevant doors so that our profession can be recognised” (Participant 8).

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter comprehensively described various themes that emanated from the data analysis phase. The thematic analysis method provided an effective strategy to describe participants' unemployment experiences and coping strategies. The participants in this study expressed experiencing difficulties, particularly in pursuit of employment, a daunting task associated with rejection, uncertainty, and lack of communication from recruiters. The struggle to secure employment presented adverse psychosocial effects on the well-being of the participants, mainly due to deprived financial security and social participation. The findings have revealed that exploring alternative opportunities to reduce the adverse effects of unemployment is a major coping strategy. In addition, participants intimated that leisure activity, optimism, resilience, and social support are other critical coping strategies. The next chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks underpinning the current study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on discussing the findings. The findings were generated from eight qualitative interviews that explored the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in the South African context. The discussion is presented under five main themes: the subjective experience of unemployment, perceived factors contributing to unemployment, coping with unemployment and a way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession. This chapter is presented in relation to relevant literature and the two theoretical frameworks, namely the Latent Deprivation Model and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping presented in Chapter Two of this study.

5.2. The subjective experience of unemployment

The subjective experience of unemployment among Registered Counsellors highlighted the job-seeking activity as a difficult experience coupled with psychosocial challenges. Furthermore, other Registered Counsellors in the current study expressed regret towards their career choice.

5.2.1. Job-seeking – a difficult experience

According to Wanberg (2012), discouragement, frustration, distraction, uncertainty, and various other factors are likely to create a difficult experience for specific individuals and influence the amount of effort on their job-seeking endeavours. Job-seeking is a purposeful and self-managed dynamic process characterised by a goal-oriented behaviour towards securing employment (Wanberg et al., 2005). However, job-seeking behaviour is likely to change over time depending on the individual's duration of unemployment. People's willingness to continue searching for employment commonly changes due to emerging life aspirations, discouragement, and lack of social support from significant individuals affecting their job-seeking behaviour. Based on van Hooft et al.'s study (2021), changes in the job-seeking behaviour that occur as the process continues are a consequence of a multifaceted interaction of an individual's propensities, determination to secure employment, and distinctive personal and social circumstances.

In line with extant literature, participants described job-seeking as a difficult and stressful process, mainly due to a lack of positive outcomes after consistently applying for opportunities. This experience brought feelings of discouragement and frustration among participants. McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) emphasised that an active search for employment is often related to poor well-being, mainly because job-seeking is usually a daunting task that is often associated

with rejection and uncertainty. A strong dedication to attain employment that is continuously met with adverse outcomes is detrimental psychosocially.

5.2.2. Experiencing psychosocial challenges

Unemployment is a stressful experience that has a causal effect on an individual's decreased psychosocial well-being (Paul & Moser, 2009). Psychosocial well-being is an eminent multidimensional construct incorporating psychological, social, and subjective aspects that influence an individual's holistic functionality (Kumar, 2020). De Witte et al. (2012) stated that unemployment negatively affects psychological well-being because it deprives individuals of employment's latent functions. As explained in Chapter Two, the latent deprivation model states that unemployment deprives people of both manifest functions (e.g., income) and the five latent functions of employment (time structure, collective purpose, social contacts, social status, and activity). The current study's findings indicate that experiencing unemployment is correlated with financial deprivation, social deprivation, and psychosocial problems. These findings also align with Pohlen's (2019) research outcomes suggesting that economic deprivation and social isolation influence psychological problems.

- **Deprived income**

Financial stress was a significant theme in the current study. Most participants reported that they found it so challenging to meet their financial needs that they had to limit activities requiring financial expenditure; they had to limit activities such as social gatherings. According to Pohlen (2019), limited financial resources reduce the individual's ability to acquire a satisfying way of living, which can be detrimental to psychosocial well-being. Even though Jahoda (1982) distinguishes the manifest function (income) from the five latent functions that employment provides for individuals, it is evident from the current study that there is an interplay between financial strain and the psychosocial challenges experienced during unemployment. Based on the current findings, access to financial resources improves access to other vital individual needs, such as social activities. This outcome is consistent with McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) stating that financial resources and financial strain are significant factors in individual well-being during unemployment.

- **Deprived social participation**

In this study, financial stress is associated with deprived social participation. Most participants indicated withdrawal from social activities, such as spending time with friends, due to being unemployed and financially strained. These findings highlighted how unemployment deprives

the latent function of social contacts among unemployed individuals. One participant indicated feeling like a financial burden to friends and the lack of social support as the reason to avoid social engagement. Kunze and Suppa (2017) stated that some unemployed individuals who experienced negativity in social activities often preferred leading private lives as they usually find displeasure in social contact.

- **Deprived social status**

According to Neubert et al. (2019), social status is one's social position compared to others in the social hierarchy. It is described as one of the focal psychological aspects influencing psychosocial well-being in unemployed individuals. Social status mainly originates from society's value system in individual lives. It is critical for the development of one's identity, and individuals are inclined to view themselves the same way others perceive them, even with a low status. Findings in this study indicated that some participants viewed themselves as unsuccessful individuals compared to their peers who are employed and have improved their lives. Kunze and Suppa (2017) attest that an individual's experience of unemployment erodes life satisfaction and social participation due to feelings of discouragement. Participants lamented that unemployment delayed them from achieving their desired life goals and affected their social status. Therefore, the findings in this study suggest that unemployment is related to a loss of status, negative self-concept, and feelings of failure.

- **Deprived collective purpose**

According to the latent function's model, individuals need a sense of collective purpose. Selenko et al. (2011) concur that individuals generally make efforts to provide and feel that they are valuable to others. Participants in this study indicated that unemployment deprived them of an opportunity to fulfil their family obligations, such as providing financial support and changing the circumstances of their families. Moreover, the collective purpose is a concept that holds strong social connotations. As a result, other participants referred to a sense of deprivation in collective purpose as they felt being less valuable within their social circles. Unemployed individuals frequently recount loss of status and the feeling of living on the scrap heap instead of a life of collective purpose (Selenko et al., 2011). The narratives shared by other participants indicated an underlying sense of purposelessness, which results in distress.

- **Effects of unemployment on psychological well-being**

Participants reported experiencing unemployment as stressful, affecting their psychological well-being and perpetuating feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, and triggering depressive

symptoms. These findings align with De Witte et al. (2012), stating that negative affective experiences of unemployment relate to reduced self-esteem, disengagement from society, and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Achdut and Refaeli (2020) concur that unemployed people present with more distress, including varied symptoms of depression, psychosomatic problems, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, than their employed counterparts. Thus, the absence of employment is expected to affect psychosocial well-being negatively.

5.2.3. Emotions experienced towards the career choice

Unemployment usually emerges as an abrupt obstacle to developing one's professional life. Individuals experiencing unemployment are prone to sadness, anger, dissatisfaction and regret towards themselves, the labour market system, and their career choices. Regret experienced towards career choice in times of unemployment is expected. Roese and Summerville (2005) state that decisions regarding career choices are the most common regrets experienced by individuals, especially when there are career development barriers.

Regret is the emotion experienced when one believes their current circumstances would have been better if they had made a different decision (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). It is considered an unpleasant feeling accompanied by a formidable sense of self-blame. In this study, some participants expressed experiencing regret to some extent towards pursuing a degree in Psychology instead of other courses presumed to have better employment opportunities. However, the intensity of regret felt by some participants towards their career choice appeared to be ameliorated by optimism and positively viewing their career as a calling and passion. In line with Hayward's (2015) findings, Registered Counsellors could cope with unemployment through spiritual beliefs and by considering their profession as a calling. A calling affects commitment and driven career behaviour (Hirschi, 2011). As a result, individuals who identify as being called to a profession may improve their commitment to the profession despite impediments and lack of accomplishments.

Furthermore, in the current study, some participants displayed a positive outlook on the future despite having professional and career development difficulties. Other participants expressed being content with their career choice despite the challenges of unemployment that they encountered. One participant highlighted the benefits of studying Psychology, indicating that the course helped her understand herself better, gain insight into other individuals' behaviour and acknowledge cultural influences on individual behaviours. Vala (2017) emphasised that Registered Counsellors should develop self-awareness during their training and have an understanding of multicultural competence as South Africa consists of diverse communities.

5.3. Perceived factors contributing to unemployment

The perceived factors contributing to the unemployment of Registered Counsellors included the availability of vacancies and lack of recognition and advocacy for the profession.

5.3.1. Availability of vacancies

Previous research has indicated a significant concern regarding limited employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors in the labour market. Responses pertaining to the availability of vacancies for Registered Counsellors varied in this study. Some participants indicated that employment opportunities are scarce, which creates a barrier for them to develop their careers and achieve financial stability. Most participants attributed the shortage of public sector vacancies for the Registered Counsellor profession to the government's lack of recognition and understanding. Government departments do not prioritise the role of Registered Counsellors in the mental healthcare system, and precedence is given to the subvention of psychologists, neglecting the Registered Counsellor profession (Abel & Louw, 2009). Participants also stated that they had experienced disregard on occasions where preference was often given to other mental health professionals, particularly social workers in government departments, schools, and the public. The study's findings concur with the extant literature on Registered Counsellors (Abel & Louw, 2009; Elkonin & Sandison, 2006; Kotze, 2006; Rouillard et al., 2016).

On a positive note, other participants reported a recent increase in vacancies, including internships, specifically for Registered Counsellors, compared to the previous years. These findings align with the increased number of contractual vacancies advertised by the Department of Public Services South Africa (DPSA) for the Department of Health, Employment and Labour, South African Police Service and Higher Education from 2021 to 2022. Currently, the Department of Health has implemented the process of employing Registered Counsellors contractually through the National Health Insurance (NHI) initiative and to be placed in hospitals and community healthcare centres nationwide.

5.3.2. The profession – Lack of recognition and advocacy

The findings obtained from the current study emphasise the significance of advocacy towards the Registered Counsellor profession. Participants in this study reported experiencing less recognition in communities and professional settings. Some participants reported that the public and other professionals found the role of Registered Counsellors unclear and often confused with that of a psychologist. Elkonin and Sandison's (2006) research illuminated the public's confusion regarding psychology professions, whereby participants frequently reported professional ignorance concerning the training and competencies of Registered Counsellors.

Poor recognition of Registered Counsellors, accompanied by limited financial resources, precludes the South African population from recognising that Registered Counsellors can be beneficial in bridging the mental health gap in the healthcare system. The lack of advocacy for Registered Counsellors is mirrored by the scarcity of employment opportunities that align with the profession's scope of practice in the public sector.

5.4. Coping with unemployment

The transactional model of stress and coping proposes that the effect of stress on emotional outcomes is mediated by the cognitive appraisal of the situation and the coping resources accessible to manage the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The situational context and interpersonal characteristics determine the coping strategies that individuals use to deal with unemployment. Coping strategies may be classified as either problem-focused or emotion-focused. Furthermore, in Chapter Two of the current study, the researcher conceptualised five coping resources that may enhance individuals' ability to manage stressful events such as unemployment. The five coping resources are cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical (Hammer & Marting, 1988).

5.4.1. Exploring alternative opportunities

Unemployed individuals often attempt to secure alternative employment opportunities to gain financial stability. Seeking alternative employment opportunities is considered a problem-focused coping strategy necessary for coping with unemployment. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), problem-focused coping entails purposely alleviating stress by rationally and proactively taking action to deal with the problem (in this case, unemployment). However, the effectiveness of this coping strategy may depend on a range of personal, social, and financial resources. The absence of financial resources may limit the individual's coping ability, affecting their personal agency and psychosocial well-being.

Participants in this study reported that although they were actively searching for employment, they also sought additional skills, pursued other career choices and entrepreneurship, and found alternative employment opportunities to reduce stress and sustain themselves. Alternative employment opportunities that were explored by the participants were varied. They included administration assistants, teacher assistants, financial advisers, informal employment, and community development. However, other participants reported being limited in pursuing expensive career choices due to financial constraints. These findings are consistent with McKee-Ryan et al.'s (2005) findings denoting that it is more beneficial for a person to engage in particular strategies to secure alternative employment as it increases chances of

reemployment, regaining financial resources and improving the ability to cope. Wanberg et al. (2002) postulated that unemployed individuals who encounter financial challenges are more likely to experience pressure to accept any job opportunity to receive an income instead of waiting for the ideal employment opportunity.

5.4.2. Leisure activity

Increased engagement in meaningful leisure activity during unemployment can function in a psychologically supportive way. According to Du Toit et al. (2018), individuals tend to practise health-promoting behaviours to improve physical well-being and cope with stressful events. Health-promoting behaviours can be achieved by participating in sports, exercise, and everyday household activities. Physical leisure activity is understood to benefit psychosocial well-being as it is likely to improve social contact, physical wellness, and individual confidence.

Most participants in the current study indicated that they engaged in physical leisure activities such as playing soccer, hunting, dancing, walking, and exercising to release stress and increase social involvement. These findings show that unemployed individuals engage in leisure activities as a coping strategy to manage stress, regulate some adverse effects of unemployment and improve their functioning. The findings align with Du Toit et al. (2018), indicating that unemployed individuals gain positive health effects from physical leisure activities to prevent boredom, structure their daily life and distract themselves from stressful problems. Participation in leisure activities is likely to assist in achieving some latent functions of employment, such as time structure (Du Toit et al., 2018; Waters & Moore, 2002).

5.4.3. Resilience and optimism

Resilience is the process of positive adaptation despite adversity. It often accentuates a positive reflection of an individual's strength to accomplish satisfactory outcomes under challenging circumstances (Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2015). Participants in the current study displayed resilience by adopting various strategies to navigate unemployment, including working in jobs unrelated to their profession, seeking emotional support, engaging in physical activities to manage stress, and having positive self-affirmations to persevere. Du Toit et al. (2018) referred to optimism as a cognitive coping resource that assists an individual in maintaining a positive outlook towards the self, others, and life in general. Most participants in the current study indicated that although disheartened with their difficult circumstances, they remained hopeful and engaged in action planning to achieve their goals for a better future. Findings in this study also suggest that participants' ability to maintain a positive outlook towards their career future and life, in general, may contribute to their determination to secure employment, even if it is

by seeking alternative opportunities to gain financial stability. In line with Mogatosi's (2020) findings suggesting that Registered Counsellors use optimism to cope with unemployment and are internally driven to develop their careers. Du Toit et al. (2018) suggested that optimism is a successful coping strategy during unemployment and positively affects psychological well-being. Overall, most participants reported a sense of optimism in their employability and future career improvement.

5.4.4. Social support

According to Amissah and Nyarko (2020), social support is the extent to which individuals are rooted in social systems capable of offering support in times of stress. Social support from family and friends is likely to lessen some of the adverse effects of unemployment on psychosocial well-being. Unemployed individuals with supportive social relationships cope better in terms of psychological well-being.

In the current study, one participant reported that seeking professional counselling services reduces psychological burdens, and seeking professional help, such as counselling, is categorised as social support. Furthermore, attending counselling sessions during unemployment is likely to help individuals identify other key coping strategies to manage stress. Some participants in the current study reported family support as one of their coping strategies to navigate difficult affective experiences and financial challenges. Amissah and Nyarko (2020) stated that positive social support experience and valuable contact with family are critical for unemployed young individuals concerning financial and social support. Financial and social support resources independently or interactively assist unemployed individuals in dealing with negative life events effectively. These findings are consistent with previous studies on Registered Counsellors, which found social support to be one of the coping strategies psychology students and graduates utilise (Mogatosi, 2020; Vala, 2017). The accessibility of solid support resources such as family and friends tend to reduce the effect of stressors experienced during unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Furthermore, social support encourages unemployed individuals to be optimistic and improve their willingness to seek employment.

5.5. A way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession

As extensively discussed in Chapter Two, the Registered Counsellor profession was developed to mitigate the shortage of mental healthcare services in South Africa, specifically in the primary healthcare sector. However, the available literature related to Registered Counsellors has widely documented the failures of the Health Professions Council of South Africa

(HPCSA) and the South African government in promoting the profession and creating necessary employment opportunities to assist Registered Counsellors in achieving their goals. Fisher (2017) echoed that Registered Counsellors should be widely employed in the public health sector, as initially envisioned in the profession's development, and meet the needs of those with limited access to mental health services in the South African context.

Participants in the current study shared their views regarding the way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession. One participant indicated that it would benefit the South African population if Registered Counsellors were placed in primary healthcare sectors to provide psychological services. The participant further highlighted the challenges of accessing mental health services in public hospitals where only one psychologist is available to provide services to a large population. This finding aligns with the findings of Docrat et al. (2019), indicating that the scarce resources provided to tackle mental health issues in the public sector are inadequately distributed, which involves having few psychologists serving in public hospitals.

Another participant in this study indicated the importance of employing Registered Counsellors in schools and other public departments. According to Dark (2020), the services provided in educational settings by Registered Counsellors positively contribute to the overall well-being of students and learners. The role of Registered Counsellors is imperative in providing psychosocial support within the education system to manage the psychological and social problems encountered by learners. Providing employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors in educational settings is important to the profession's goal to prevent mental health problems and promote psychosocial well-being for individuals.

Lastly, participants in this study urged Registered Counsellors to help create employment, engage in their communities, equip themselves with online counselling skills, and align their professional practices with modern technology to tackle the unemployment crisis. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a substantial shift from traditional counselling, with individuals opting for online counselling. According to HPCSA (2014), providing mental healthcare services remotely to South African communities and disadvantaged areas has the potential to minimise the crisis experienced in public healthcare.

5.6. Conclusion

In the current study, the participants' experiences after registration with HPCSA were predominantly negative due to the lack of employment opportunities, psychosocial challenges experienced during unemployment and the various challenges surrounding the Registered

Counsellor profession. However, the findings of this study indicate that participants adopt various coping strategies to deal with the negative experiences of unemployment. In the current study, Registered Counsellors predominantly applied physical, cognitive, and social resources as coping strategies. The study's findings were discussed in relation to the available literature and the theories underpinning this study.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents the summary of findings, which outlines the conclusions of the current study and the accomplishment of the research aim and objectives. The chapter also includes recommendations for future research, limitations of this study and the researcher's personal reflection that provides insight into the researcher's interest in the topic.

6.2. Summary of the findings

The current study explored the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in South Africa. This study aimed to provide an overview of how unemployment affects Registered Counsellors. The objectives of this study were to explore the experiences of Registered Counsellors during unemployment, factors contributing to their unemployment and coping strategies used by unemployed Registered Counsellors after registration with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

This study presented evidence that Registered Counsellors are passionate about their profession and they are determined to secure relevant employment opportunities, only to be disheartened by unemployment. The findings of this study revealed that Registered Counsellors experience difficulties during unemployment, particularly when searching for employment. Registered Counsellors reported experiencing employment seeking as a daunting task associated with rejection, uncertainty, and lack of communication from recruiters.

The struggle to secure employment presented an interplay of negative psychosocial effects on the well-being of Registered Counsellors, mainly due to financial strain. The psychosocial challenges experienced by Registered Counsellors in this study included deprived social participation, social status, collective purpose, and distress presenting with feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. The findings indicated that Registered Counsellors in this study use various coping strategies to manage difficult unemployment experiences. Exploring alternative opportunities to reduce the adverse effects of unemployment dominated as a problem-focused coping strategy. Leisure activity, optimism and social support were reported as other coping strategies utilised by Registered Counsellors during unemployment.

Regarding exploring alternative employment opportunities and career choices, Registered Counsellors in this study intended to explore other careers, which included pursuing a master's

degree in Psychology, a Bachelor's degree in Education, a course in employee assistance programme and a psychometry programme. Employment opportunities unrelated to Psychology that the Registered Counsellors in this study have secured varied and included the following job categories; administration assistant, teacher assistant, financial adviser, informal employment, and community development.

Registered Counsellors in this study raised concerns about the lack of advocacy for the profession and perceived limited vacancies as contributing to their unemployment. As a way forward to combat the overwhelming experiences of unemployment in the profession, Registered Counsellors suggested that more employment opportunities must be created in the primary healthcare sector and education settings, which will also increase the provision of psychological services. Furthermore, Registered Counsellors must seek to equip themselves with online counselling skills and self-employment strategies. They must align their professional practices with modern technology to tackle the unemployment crisis as a way forward for the Registered Counsellor profession. Based on HPCSA (2017), Registered Counsellors represent the least likely practitioner group to engage in online consultations.

6.3. Implications for future research and recommendations

The findings of the current study hold implications for future research as there is an opportunity to further explore the experiences of unemployed Registered Counsellors at a larger scale. The study is of an exploratory and interpretive nature, extensive research will be essential to improve and further elucidate the novel findings of the current study. Furthermore, the study contributes to an under researched topic of inquiry in the field of psychology and further accentuates mental healthcare and social service challenges within the South African context.

The Registered Counsellor profession has the potential to increase accessibility to mental healthcare services and steer the promotion of psychosocial well-being for disadvantaged communities in South Africa. There is a need to create permanent employment opportunities at the Department of Health to increase access to psychological services. During the Health Department Budget Vote 2022/23 held on the 10th of May 2022, the report indicated that a strategic plan to purchase mental health services through contracting Registered Counsellors through the National Health Insurance (NHI) conditional grant is underway (Department of Health, 2022). However, this raises concern for Registered Counsellors as it appears as a temporary solution to the crisis of unemployment affecting Registered Counsellors. Thus, it would benefit the Department of Health to create permanent employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors. This initiative would improve the distribution of necessary resources

to provide mental health services while simultaneously rescuing the Registered Counsellor profession from the plight of unemployment.

The lack of acknowledgement for Registered Counsellors in South Africa is a matter of concern. Findings from the current study emphasise the need to promote awareness and advocacy for Registered Counsellors in the South African context. The Professional Board of Psychology and HPCSA are responsible for raising awareness and educating the public about the purpose and role of Registered Counsellors. This duty needs to be revisited by the HPCSA and the Board of Psychology and must be executed appropriately.

Lastly, it would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study that will follow up on the employment trends of Registered Counsellors in the following years, considering the initiative by the Department of Health and NHI. Exploring the role and experiences of Registered Counsellors employed in primary healthcare systems would also be beneficial. This inquiry would provide information on whether the employment opportunities for Registered Counsellors created by the Department of Health in the primary healthcare sector allow the profession to achieve its initial objective; to bridge the gap existing in the mental healthcare system in South Africa.

6.4. Limitations of the study

Regarding the shortcomings of this study, the findings of experiences and coping strategies of Registered Counsellors during unemployment cannot be generalised and do not certainly represent all the experiences of unemployed Registered Counsellors. In this study, the researcher intended to explore how unemployment affects Registered Counsellors and identify the coping strategies utilised during unemployment using a small sample. Thus, the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population. All the participants were Black Africans. They were not completely representative of all the races in South Africa. The researcher in the current study is a Registered Counsellor. This might have contributed to an over-identification with the participants. However, the researcher used reflexivity and acknowledged that prior experiences concerning the phenomenon may have influenced the research process.

The current study used telephonic semi-structured individual interviews to collect data. Thus, a limitation to be noted in conducting telephonic semi-structured individual interviews is the potential loss of observable visual cues and body language between the participants and the researcher. The lack of visual cues may have potentially eliminated the additional detail that gives richness to the data in qualitative studies. However, to mitigate the mentioned limitation, the researcher attentively listened to changes in verbal cues such as pauses, rushed responses

and tones to recognise potential confusion or discomfort from the participants. As the researcher could not use body language and facial expressions as tools to probe answers, every question was clearly articulated to the participants and repeated when necessary. Overall, the telephonic semi-structured individual interviews proved logistical convenience with better access to geographically dispersed participants, flexibility for scheduling interviews and reduced costs.

6.5. Personal experience

As a Registered Counsellor who has experienced the difficulties of unemployment, the researcher could closely identify with the topic of the current study. Due to her own experiences, the researcher deemed it essential to understand other Registered Counsellors' unemployment experiences and how they cope with the challenges that emerge in the profession. It is saddening to be passionate about a profession and discover that one must jump through hoops and hurdles to receive recognition and acknowledgement in professional and community settings. The researcher is grateful that the Department of Health and other government departments have taken the initiative to recognise the importance of Registered Counsellors and the prominent role they can play in the primary healthcare sector and the South African context at large. If mental health professionals can vow to work together to prioritise mental healthcare, victory is certain.

6.6. Conclusion

In this study, the researcher explored the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in the South African context. The researcher presented the background of the study, highlighted the burden of unemployment in South Africa, and outlined the problem statement, the significance of the study and the research objectives and questions in Chapter One. In Chapter Two, a review of extant literature and theoretical frameworks anchoring the study's research objectives were provided. The third chapter delineated the research methodology comprising the research approach, design, and paradigm and presented the data collection and thematic analysis process. In the fourth chapter, the researcher presented the research findings and illustrated the themes from the data analysis. The fifth chapter discussed the findings under the main themes and in view of the relevant literature. Lastly, the researcher provided the summary of findings, recommendations for future research, limitations of this study and the researcher's personal reflection in Chapter Six.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Letter



02 November 2022

Ncebakazi Jili (220082344)
School of Applied Human Sc
Howard College

Dear N Jili,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004927/2022

Project title: Exploring the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed registered counsellors in the South African context

Degree: MSc

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 18 October 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 02 November 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

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Appendix B: Informed Consent



UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC) INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Sir/Madam

Date: 29 August 2022

My name is Ncebakazi Jili, a researcher from the School of Applied Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College). I am currently studying for a Master of Social Sciences in Counselling Psychology to register as a counselling psychologist. As part of my degree, I am required to complete a research project. The research project I am working on aims to explore the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors.

The researcher is inviting unemployed Registered Counsellors and those who have experienced unemployment for at least six months after registering with HPCSA as Registered Counsellors. Participants are required to have qualified as Registered Counsellors from 2014 to 2021.

The study is expected to enroll a maximum of 10 participants that will be interviewed online using a video-conferencing platform compliant with HIPAA standards and the Health Professions Council of South Africa, e.g., Microsoft Teams or Zoom. A link will be emailed to you by the researcher.

Your participation in this study will be of great significance to help in expanding knowledge on how individuals can cope with unemployment and ensure that appropriate psychological interventions are prioritised for those experiencing unemployment.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are entitled to withdraw from the process without any negative consequences. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher. All the information gathered will remain confidential, and to ensure anonymity, the researcher will ask you to choose a pseudonym to protect your real identity. The study will involve a virtual semi-structured individual interview in which a number of questions will be asked.

Please note that:

- The interview questions may take 30– 45 minutes of your time.
- Any information you give will not be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research and academic purposes only.
- Data will be stored securely and destroyed five years after completing the research. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data.
- If you are willing to be interviewed, please indicate (by ticking as applicable) whether or not you are willing to allow the interview to be recorded by the following equipment:

Motion of willingness	Willing	NOT willing
Audio/video–record equipment		

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact me: Ncebakazi Jili at [REDACTED]; [REDACTED].

The research is overseen by Ms Ntombi Mtwentula (research supervisor), a lecturer in the discipline of Psychology at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. You may contact her: at mtwentulan@ukzn.ac.za; or 031-260-1087.

You may also contact the research office through the HSSREC Research Office contact details; Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za; Tel: 031 260 3587/4557/8350.

Thank you for your participation in this research.

Declaration

I..... (Full Pseudonym of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participate in the research project.

I understand that the information I will provide will be anonymous and confidential and will only be used for research purposes. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time should I so desire.

Signature of Participant

Date

.....

.....

- In the absence of an electronic or written signature, by marking a tick next to this statement, this statement can be treated as informed consent.**

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Topic: Exploring the experiences and coping strategies of unemployed Registered Counsellors in the South African context

The researcher will utilise the following semi-structured questions as prompts:

1. Where was your degree in psychology obtained?
2. When was your degree in psychology completed?
3. What has been your experience as a Registered Counsellor post registration with HPCSA?
4. How long have you experienced unemployment?
5. How does being unemployed makes you feel?
6. What do you think is the primary cause of your unemployment as a Registered Counsellor?
7. What measures have you taken as a way of securing employment?
8. How has unemployment affected your sense of direction in life?
9. As a professional, how has unemployment affected your career growth?
10. How do you think unemployment has affected your social life?
11. How do you reduce the stress you encounter as an unemployed Registered Counselor?
12. What leisure activities do you engage in during the unemployment period?

Appendix D: Biographical Information

NB: Please fill out the biographical information form to provide details pertinent to the study. All information is confidential as outlined in the consent form.

Participant Biographical Information	
Pseudonym	
Age	
Province	
Language	
Race	
Name of Degree	
Year of completion	
Year of Registration with HPCSA	
Number of months/years unemployed	
Platform preferred for the interview: <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Zoom➤ WhatsApp Call➤ Telephonic Call➤ Microsoft Teams	
Suitable date and time for the interview	

Appendix E: Turnitin similarity report

Ncebakazi Jili - Thesis July 2023

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