

Contesting discourses and building narratives: A social cluster framework for socially just career practice

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Abstract

Career development practice can serve as a mechanism for social justice by enabling individuals to construct sustainable career narratives (Arthur, 2005). However, to support cohesive identity development, individuals - and the career development professionals who assist them - can attend to the language used in career discourse, as language can become a site of power that can expand or constrain perceived possibilities (Burr, 2015). The Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI) addresses this concern through a deliberately constructed sociolinguistic framework. This paper examines CADI's application as an example of socially just practice, with implications for career development theory and policy.

Key words: cluster approach to the development of identity, career development, sustainable careers, career narrative, social identity

Introduction

Since Parsons first established the foundations of vocational guidance in 1909 (Jones, 1994), the career development profession has maintained a vital role in supporting individuals to navigate their working lives. This foundational work positioned career

development as social justice, aimed at helping people access opportunities and overcome barriers to meaningful work (Brown, 2016).

The contemporary landscape presents challenges that intensify the need for career development support. Rapid technological change is transforming workplaces, with many jobs reshaped or made obsolete by automation and artificial intelligence (Aroles et al., 2021; Behrend et al., 2022). Global economic forces have also transformed how we seek, secure, and retain employment, and individuals often need to constantly adapt and market their skills in dynamic labour markets (Bisello et al., 2022). These shifts, combined with globalisation's influence on career trajectories, have altered how individuals navigate their working lives, making adaptable and inclusive career development approaches more crucial than ever (Viviers et al., 2021).

Recent theoretical advances have brought renewed focus to two key areas that enhance the profession's capacity to serve its social justice mission: Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (SCET) and narrative approaches to career development. SCET recognises that career development occurs within complex, interconnected systems where individual capabilities, organisational contexts, and broader societal factors dynamically interact to influence career sustainability (Donald et al., 2024b). De Vos (2020) proposed that sustainable careers are ones that allow an individual to continually adapt and adjust as their career unfolds and to meet their changing needs, characterised by '*mutually beneficial consequences* for the person and for their surrounding context, and should be considered by taking a *long-term perspective*' (De Vos et al., 2020, p. 10). The SCET framework moves beyond traditional individual-focused approaches to acknowledge the systemic factors that shape career possibilities and constraints.

Complementing this perspective, narrative approaches position individuals as active authors of their career stories, empowering them to construct meaning through their career experiences (Savickas, 2020). These approaches have been implemented in diverse ways to support career development, from facilitating narrative change in career construction counselling (Cardoso et al., 2021) to exploring dialogical self-processes that help individuals integrate different aspects of their identity (McIlveen & Healy, 2024). Career identity as a narrative practice enables individuals to position themselves within their chosen fields while maintaining agency over their professional development (LaPointe, 2010). This approach may reduce the overwhelm that can lead to premature career foreclosure or prolonged identity diffusion, which can limit career development (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011), instead supporting individuals to develop adaptable and sustainable career identities that can evolve with changing circumstances.

The role of language in socially just career guidance

Career narratives are primarily linguistic constructions - the words we use become the vehicle for understanding our careers, and our narratives are constructed within the bounds of available vocabulary. From a social constructionist perspective, language is not merely a tool for describing pre-existing realities but can actively participate in constructing the social worlds we inhabit (Burr, 2015).

We can view language as an important factor in how we make sense of our experiences, relationships, and identities, including our professional selves. In this context, the process of narrative career development suggests individuals construct coherent life stories that

integrate their past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations through the linguistic resources available to them (McAdams & McLean, 2013). This ongoing process of meaning-making is deeply influenced by cultural norms and social interactions, with narrative development shaped by the specific linguistic and cultural contexts in which individuals are situated (Arulmani, 2014; Hammack, 2008).

It is also important to acknowledge the role the individual's social identity plays in influencing and guiding their decisions. Very few individuals work completely in isolation; for the majority, work is a social activity, and through our work we come to belong to specific social groups. For example, an apprentice baker is part of the 'food production' and 'apprentice' groups and sits on the outside of the 'baker' group; but once they become fully qualified, they will move further within the 'baker' group, and their membership of this group informs both their identity and their future career narrative. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how membership of social groups influences an individual's self-concept; both related to others within the same group, and compared to other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Membership of these groups biases individuals positively towards their existing groups and negatively to other groups (Dunham, 2018), and over time group membership can blur the boundaries between individual and social identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

The language commonly used to describe career-related social groups is often drawn from occupational titles and industry classifications. This means that when individuals encounter career language, they are not simply receiving information about job tasks or workplace activities - they are being presented with potential social group memberships. Terms like 'teacher', 'tradesperson', or 'executive' function simultaneously as job descriptions and social identity markers, carrying implicit messages about who belongs in these groups, and what characteristics members are expected to possess. This dual function of occupational language makes it particularly powerful in shaping career possibilities, as individuals navigate both the practical requirements of different work roles and the social implications of group membership when constructing their career narratives.

Individual words and phrases carry embedded meanings and assumptions that extend far beyond their dictionary definitions, bringing with them cultural, social, and contextual associations that shape how we understand possibilities and constraints (Burr, 2015). Career stories are shaped by the linguistic resources available to individuals, with language having the power to either limit or expand career possibilities (Arthur, 2024; Savickas et al., 2009). The autobiographical memories that form the foundation of our career narratives are themselves constructed through language (Reese & Robertson, 2019), with early experiences and influences becoming integrated into our sense of professional self through ongoing linguistic interpretation (Fivush, 2011).

Consider, for example, a secondary student who has long aspired to become a medical *doctor*. Through repeated exposure to this term, they have constructed rich associations with the word *doctor*; perhaps encompassing notions of prestige, intellectual rigour, service to others, and social status. They have begun to construct a career narrative which centres on doctor in the dynamic process of identity development (McLean et al., 2007). Should circumstances prevent them from pursuing medical studies, the student may experience significant difficulty realigning their identity with alternative career pathways, not because these alternatives lack merit, but because the available language has constrained their capacity to envision equally meaningful professional futures.

Language can help people articulate future career pathways when appropriate linguistic resources are available (Lent & Brown, 2020), but it can equally limit possibilities when such resources are absent or inadequate. The language we encounter and employ can do more than simply describe our career possibilities; it may participate in constructing them, enabling individuals to author their own career stories when flexible and inclusive linguistic frameworks are available (Winslade, 2011).

Language and its ability to expand or limit career possibilities

This capacity for language to carry meaning and construct understanding makes it potentially powerful, with the ability to either expand or constrain individual career possibilities. Returning to our aspiring doctor, the specific linguistic frameworks available to them will significantly influence their capacity to navigate career transitions; and if the student remains anchored to the specific occupational title *doctor*, alternative pathways run the risk of being perceived as failure.

However, if the student has access to more flexible linguistic resources that allow them to conceptualise themselves instead as *someone who helps others, cares about health, and works hard* - all traits commonly ascribed to medical doctors - this broader language instead expands their career possibilities. Rather than being limited to one narrow and competitive pathway, they can now envision themselves working across diverse roles, unified by the work preferences and values they have articulated (Cardoso et al., 2021).

Applied to a specific and often marginalised group, the experiences of neurodivergent individuals provide compelling evidence for language's power to both constrain and liberate career possibilities. Neurodivergent people, who account for an estimated 15 to 20% of the global population, have historically faced significant barriers to workforce participation compared to neurotypical individuals (Doyle, 2020). The evolution of language surrounding neurodiversity demonstrates both the potential and the pitfalls of linguistic change in career contexts; while shifting discourse has opened new opportunities and prompted organisations to develop targeted recruitment programmes for neurodivergent employees, these same linguistic changes risk reinforcing limiting stereotypes (Krzeminska et al., 2019).

As Krzeminska et al. (2019) suggest, contemporary neurodiversity discourse often characterises neurodivergent individuals as problem solvers and divergent thinkers with strong work ethics, subsequently channelling them toward roles aligned with these narrow characterisations while excluding them from positions involving interpersonal engagement. This linguistic framing can prevent neurodivergent individuals from accessing roles they may both enjoy and excel in, simply because dominant discourse suggests these positions are unsuitable. Evidence suggests that when neurodivergent individuals gain access to more flexible linguistic frameworks, they can construct more sustainable career narratives that integrate seemingly contradictory aspects of their identity (Chapman, 2020). When neurodivergent individuals can access language that helps them identify their preferred ways of working rather than being confined to traditional occupational categories, this enhances their self-efficacy and supports the development of adaptable career narratives (Lebrón-Cruz & Orvell, 2023). This evidence demonstrates that language functions not merely as description but as a mechanism that actively shapes the boundaries of what individuals perceive as possible within their career development, with particularly significant implications for those whose experiences have been marginalised by dominant career discourses.

The origins and co-option of career development language

Career development language is not constructed in isolation but emerges from specific historical, social, and institutional contexts that shape its meanings and applications. Understanding these origins reveals how contemporary practice has inherited linguistic frameworks that may not align with current professional aims or serve diverse populations effectively.

Many of the terms routinely employed in contemporary career development practice originate from occupational classification systems designed for entirely different purposes. These classification systems, such as the International Standard Classification of Occupations (International Labour Organization, 2024) and the Occupational Standard Classification for Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), were primarily developed for statistical analysis, labour market reporting, and administrative coordination rather than individual career guidance. However, these categorisations have become deeply embedded in career development practice through a process of linguistic co-option. They now appear prominently in career guidance resources, such as the Jobs and Skills Australia Occupational Profiles (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024), job search platforms including the European Union's EURES (EUROPEAN Employment Services) website (Wójcik, 2023), and UK labour market information materials (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2021). This widespread adoption has occurred despite the mismatch between their original administrative purpose and the nuanced, individualised nature of career development work.

This co-option process extends beyond formal classification systems to include assessment frameworks and theoretical models developed in specific historical contexts. Some foundational approaches to career assessment and guidance were created decades ago within specific cultural and social contexts yet continue to be applied broadly and potentially without adequate consideration of how their embedded assumptions may limit their effectiveness (Athanasou, 2007). As one example, Holland's RIASEC Codes from over half a century ago (Holland, 1959) remain a staple in career assessment (Zainudin et al., 2020), despite the limitations and critiques of interest-based decisions within the literature (Arnold, 2010). Hoff et al. (2018) found only a modest correlation between interest congruence and job satisfaction in their meta-analysis, and Earl (2014) found that even when congruence does exist it is often not sufficient to predict job satisfaction. Interests are also typically the first factor discarded in the decision-making process (Athanasou, 2008) and correlate poorly with other key indicators of job satisfaction, such as skills or values (Dawis, 2005). The persistence of interest-based approaches, despite mounting evidence questioning their predictive validity for job satisfaction and performance (Arnold, 2010; Bowles, 2008; Hanna & Rounds, 2020), exemplifies how career development practice can become anchored to historical frameworks, rather than evolving with evidence and changing social contexts.

The implications of this linguistic inheritance become particularly problematic when considering equity and inclusion. Frameworks developed primarily within and for specific majority groups may not produce equivalent outcomes when applied to diverse populations. Research demonstrates potential for misalignment when traditional approaches are used with ethnic or cultural minorities, suggesting that seemingly universal frameworks may embed cultural assumptions that limit their effectiveness across different contexts (Garibay, 2020). Similarly, evidence indicates that established classification systems can reinforce gender stereotypes, potentially constraining career possibilities for women and non-binary

individuals (Ludwikowski et al., 2020; Su et al., 2009). The limited cross-cultural validation of many major classification systems raises serious questions about their universal applicability and highlights potential social justice concerns (Eyles et al., 2019).

Donald's (2024) analysis of academia as an exclusionary career ecosystem illustrates how inherited linguistic frameworks can systematically disadvantage particular groups, even when exclusion is not the intended outcome. These exclusionary effects may be unintentional consequences of using language developed for different purposes or within different contexts, but they are nevertheless impactful in creating barriers that prevent individuals from accessing their full range of career possibilities. Such systematic exclusion through language directly contradicts the social justice and empowerment aims that have historically motivated the career development profession (Brown, 2016). This analysis suggests that career development professionals should move beyond passive acceptance of inherited linguistic frameworks toward deliberate consideration of how language choices impact practice effectiveness and equity outcomes.

The case for deliberately chosen career development language

Given the power of language to shape career possibilities and the limitations of inherited linguistic frameworks, career development professionals, and policy makers should be aware of the language they choose to employ in their work. Inclusive language that respects diverse viewpoints, cultures, and identities supports equitable career development practices. Rather than defaulting to inherited frameworks that may embed exclusionary assumptions, professionals can actively choose linguistic resources that recognise the full spectrum of human experience and career possibility. This commitment aligns with the profession's social justice origins while addressing emerging workplace diversity challenges (Arthur, 2005).

Central to this approach is ensuring that individuals have access to diverse linguistic options when constructing their career narratives. When people can choose from flexible vocabularies reflecting their unique perspectives, they gain agency in authoring their professional stories and articulating their development authentically (McMahon, 2024). Those supporting career development could introduce multiple frameworks, helping individuals evaluate options within their specific context whilst developing critical assessment skills. Hooley et al. (2021) suggest that a truly socially just approach might involve exposing individuals to multiple language frameworks, enabling them to compare approaches and develop critical consciousness about linguistic resources.

Such empowerment through language directly supports the development of sustainable careers by enabling individuals to continually adapt and adjust their narratives as circumstances evolve (De Vos et al., 2020). By moving beyond passive acceptance of traditional frameworks toward active curation of inclusive language, professionals can create conditions for more equitable outcomes (Donald et al., 2024a). A socially just language framework could provide scaffolded understanding whilst offering flexible vocabulary for navigating contemporary work complexity. Such frameworks could enable people to challenge existing norms while authoring adaptable narratives reflecting their strengths and capabilities. However, all language frameworks, including CADI, are culturally situated and may not be relevant in all applications. This recognises that sustainable career development occurs within dynamic ecosystems where linguistic resources can constrain or expand perceived possibilities (Donald et al., 2024b).

The Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI)

CADI was designed to address the challenge articulated in the previous sections. Through accessible and flexible language, the framework allows individuals to identify and explore their preferred ways of working aligned with six social groupings (known as *clusters*). Even the choice of the word clusters was deliberate; rather than assigning specific groups, individuals are simply *clustered* together loosely with the option to move within and between clusters as they need.

The framework shifts the career development conversation in the early, explorative phase away from specific jobs or industries and from 'which jobs should I choose?' to 'how do I prefer to work?' (Sattler, 2024). As the framework can be understood by diverse populations without requiring specialist knowledge of labour market structures, it empowers individuals to adopt and adjust their individual understanding of their preferred ways of working, aligned with the clusters, as they construct their career narrative.

Essential to the framework's application is the principle that professionals retain discretion over which approach to employ with their clients and/or students (Athanasou, 2007). For this reason, CADI is positioned as one option amongst many, recognising that different linguistic frameworks will resonate differently with different individuals. Some professionals prefer models that focus on interests, such as Holland's codes (Holland, 1959), for example, or strengths-based frameworks that ask people to reflect on the things they do well (Littman-Ovadia et al., 2021). Additionally, individuals are at liberty to decide that the framework does not align with their existing identity structures, and there is no assumption that the framework will be suitable or preferred for all people.

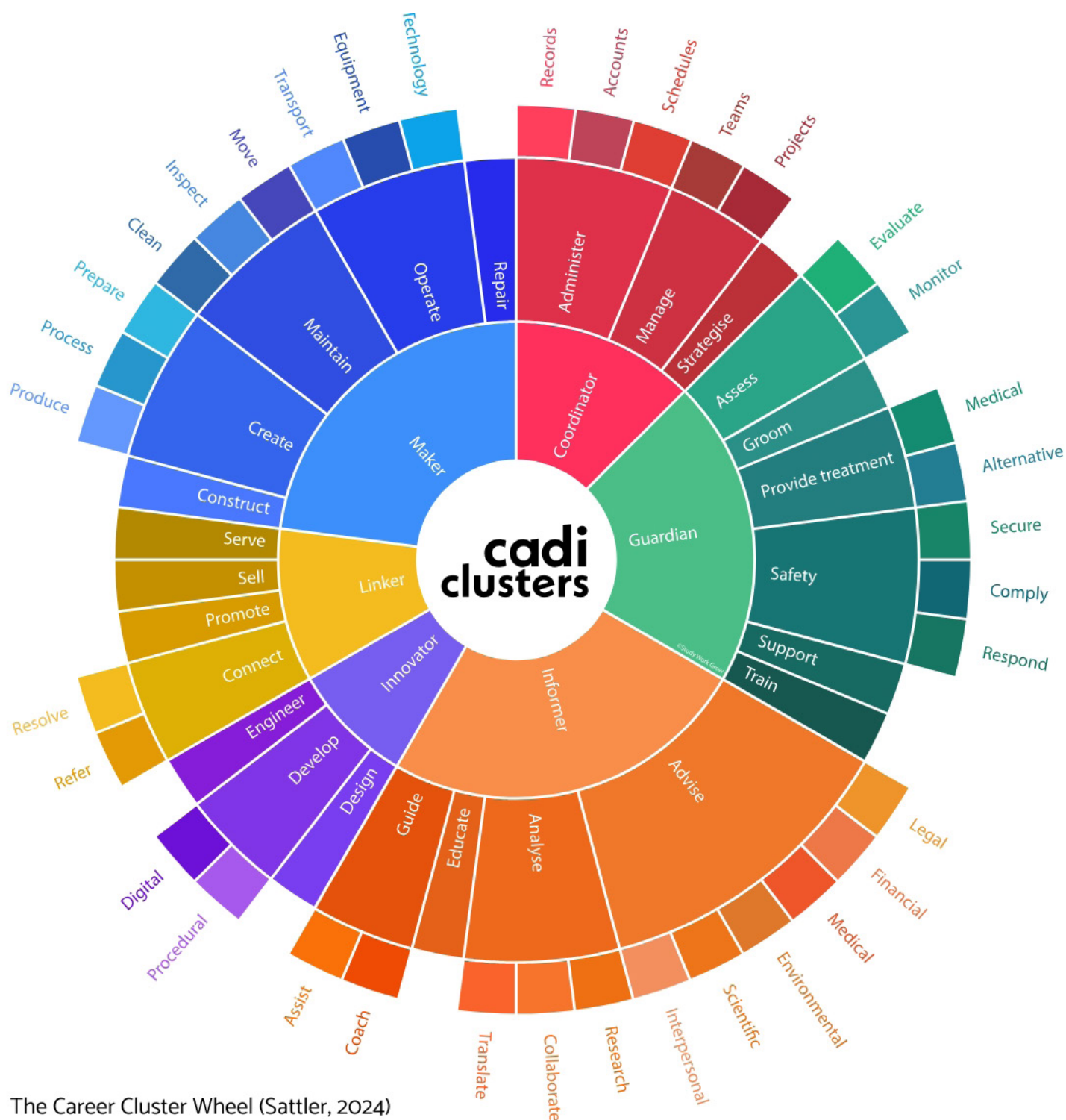
CADI combines a constructivist approach to career development (specifically Career Construction Theory), with SIT, and offers a framework that demonstrates how individuals construct their social identity *through* and *with* their career narratives. SIT explores how individuals naturally categorise themselves and others into groups, which reduces complexity and organises social information (Tajfel, 1974), and with the CADI framework individuals can identify with particular ways of working in clusters that resonate with their values, preferences, and self-concept.

The framework also incorporates thinking from SCET, recognising that career development occurs within complex, interconnected systems where individual capabilities, organisational contexts, and broader societal factors interact dynamically to influence career sustainability (Donald et al., 2024b). By acknowledging these multiple influences, CADI offers language that may accommodate diverse life circumstances and career trajectories within these dynamic ecosystems.

The six clusters

The CADI framework organises ways of working into six distinct clusters, each representing a different approach to contributing value in work environments. These clusters were developed by examining patterns across four key dimensions: the types of skills people enjoy using, the tasks they find meaningful, the work environments where they thrive, and the values that drive their engagement. The six CADI clusters can also be subcategorised into sub-clusters for further exploration, if chosen by the individual, and this framework is demonstrated through the CADI Career Cluster Wheel.

Figure 1: The CADI career cluster wheel



The Career Cluster Wheel (Sattler, 2024)

Makers are defined as individuals who prefer physical operation tasks, such as manipulating equipment, inspecting structures, operating vehicles, preparing food, and are skilled in these areas. They value consistency and clear procedures and are not often found working behind a desk.

Guardians are characterised by their focus on protective and caring functions, engaging in tasks such as monitoring health and safety, providing direct care to individuals, implementing

security measures, and responding to emergencies. They typically value service to others and demonstrate strong interpersonal skills in supportive environments.

Linkers specialise in facilitating connections and transactions, undertaking activities such as customer consultation, resource coordination, sales processes, and service delivery. They demonstrate strong communication abilities and typically thrive in environments requiring relationship building and problem-solving through connection.

Informers are distinguished by their engagement in knowledge transfer and guidance activities, including teaching, advising, explaining complex information, and helping others navigate systems and processes. They value intellectual engagement and typically excel in roles requiring communication of specialised knowledge.

Coordinators focus on organisational and administrative functions, engaging in tasks such as project management, event planning, budget oversight, and process development. They demonstrate strong attention to detail and analytical skills, typically preferring structured environments with clear objectives.

Innovators are characterised by their engagement in creative and developmental work, including designing new products or systems, conducting research, developing technological solutions, and creating novel approaches to problems. They value intellectual challenge and creative expression, typically thriving in environments that encourage experimentation.

Identifying cluster preferences

Individuals can identify their cluster preferences through several approaches, each drawing on Self-Categorisation Theory, which is the process by which people define themselves in relation to social groups (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). This theoretical framework explains how individuals naturally seek to understand their position within social categories, using these identifications to construct their sense of self and place within broader social contexts. The most structured approach involves completing the short 30-question forced-choice CADI assessment, which presents individuals with pairs of short 'I' statements and requires them to consider their preferences and natural inclinations. Individuals typically access this assessment through a web search for career-related terms or via direct referral from counsellors, and the assessment requires no registration or personally identifying information, and the only demographic data collected relates to their country of residence. Since initialisation in 2022, approximately 46,000 individuals have completed the assessment through the online platform (thecareerclusters.com). This process facilitates systematic reflection on values, work preferences, and the types of contributions individuals find most meaningful, and as such performs a reflective career construction function (McIlveen & Healy, 2024).

Alternative approaches include guided self-categorisation with counsellor support or independent self-categorisation. Guided self-categorisation requires the career development professional to introduce the cluster concepts and facilitate exploration of resonance and connection. Independent self-categorisation allows individuals to engage with cluster descriptions through personal reflection on their preferences and experiences. This method maintains individual agency over the identification process while providing a structured framework for self-exploration. Cluster identification is designed to be flexible and dynamic rather than restrictive or permanent. Individuals may identify with multiple

clusters simultaneously or experience shifts in preference as they gain experience or encounter changing life circumstances.

How are the CADI clusters used?

The CADI clusters provide a structural framework that functions as an occupational scaffold for the creation and delivery of career development materials and interventions. Rather than replacing existing career development practices, the cluster language offers a common vocabulary that can be integrated into established programmes and approaches. This scaffolding function operates at multiple levels: it provides professionals with a systematic way to organise career information, offers individuals a coherent framework for understanding work preferences, and creates shared language that facilitates communication between counsellors, educators, clients, and other stakeholders.

The framework's utility lies in its capacity to bridge the gap between abstract career development concepts and practical application. By providing clear categories that encompass diverse ways of working without being tied to specific occupations, the clusters enable professionals to design interventions that are both theoretically grounded and immediately accessible to clients and students. This approach has proven particularly valuable in contexts where traditional occupational language may be intimidating, unfamiliar, or limiting, such as with neurodiverse clients (Sattler, 2025). The evaluation process for the utility of the CADI framework is still in its early stages, however the following examples are drawn from interviews, case studies, and informal feedback provided by career development professionals and educators who have begun to make the framework their own within their individual contexts. In each case, professionals choose their methodology and implementation to suit their practice.

Development of career-related learning materials

Educational institutions and career development services have incorporated the cluster framework as a scaffold for creating and organising career-related resources. This application often involves using the clusters as an additional lens through which career information can be structured and presented. For example, a career guidance service for newly arrived refugees in Australia integrated cluster language into their job guides and occupational overviews, providing participants with multiple pathways to understand and categorise work opportunities. Multiple secondary schools have adopted the framework within their subject selection processes, offering students an additional perspective for evaluating educational pathways. Students often complete the online assessment prior to undertaking the subject selection process as part of a suite of evaluation methods chosen by the school and sometimes combined with additional assessments such as the Morrisby tool. Rather than focusing solely on academic requirements or specific career outcomes, students may then be guided by the school to consider how different subject combinations might align with their preferred ways of working. This approach has proven particularly valuable during transition points where students must make decisions about specialisation areas or post-secondary pathways, and the clusters have been incorporated into curriculum design to aid in this process (Jerrabomberra High School, 2023).

Integration into existing career development programmes

Established career development programmes have successfully incorporated the cluster framework as a complementary language system without requiring restructuring of their approaches. A youth-focused Tasmanian organisation supporting at-risk students through work experience placements has integrated cluster language throughout their existing programme structure. Staff receive training in the framework, and the organisation uses cluster identification to enhance the strategic matching of students with appropriate work experience opportunities. This integration approach demonstrates the framework's flexibility and compatibility with diverse programmatic approaches. Rather than requiring organisations to abandon existing methodologies, the clusters provide additional structure and vocabulary that can enhance the effectiveness of established practices.

Individual guidance and assessment

In one-to-one career guidance settings, professionals have found the cluster framework valuable for facilitating deeper exploration of career preferences and possibilities. A rehabilitation counsellor working with young people who have experienced career-limiting injuries described using the clusters to validate clients' previous career choices while simultaneously opening exploration of alternative pathways. When working with a young person who had been pursuing manual trades work, the counsellor helped them recognise their strong identification as a Maker, affirming their original career direction and building self-efficacy. The conversation then progressed to explore other cluster identifications, revealing potential career directions that could accommodate their changed physical circumstances while maintaining alignment with their core work preferences. The framework has also demonstrated effectiveness with neurodivergent individuals with whom traditional interest-based approaches may not adequately capture the complexity of their career development needs (Sattler, 2025). In these contexts, the cluster language provides a way to separate work preferences from specific occupational titles, reducing the likelihood that individuals will apply limiting assumptions or biases to their career exploration.

Workforce development applications

Industry bodies and educational institutions have utilised the cluster framework to create transparency and accessibility in workforce development initiatives. Industry organisations have mapped their workforce requirements to the cluster framework, enabling potential workers who understand their cluster preferences to identify relevant opportunities using familiar language. This approach has proven particularly valuable in industries where technical terminology or traditional occupational classifications may create barriers to entry or understanding; for example, the clusters were used as part of a Women in STEM project to highlight opportunities in the geospatial industry (She Maps, 2025). Universities have similarly mapped their degree offerings to the cluster framework, providing prospective students with additional ways to understand how different academic programmes might align with their work preferences. This mapping process helps bridge the gap between academic study and future work applications, supporting more informed decision-making about educational pathways.

Facilitating family engagement

The cluster framework has also been used to democratise career conversations within family systems, addressing concerns about overwhelming family influence on young

people's career development (Haywood & Scullion, 2018). When family members complete the cluster assessment themselves, they engage in reflection on their own career choices and work preferences, creating a foundation for more informed discussions about career possibilities. This approach has been undertaken in a variety of formats; in some cases, schools will ask family members and students to complete the online CADI assessment at the same time during an information session, which generally results in engaging and illuminating conversations between family and student. In other formats, educators will offer family members the option to take the assessment in their own time to increase confidence in the model and support robust career conversations. The shared language provides a structure for these conversations that focuses on work preferences rather than specific occupational outcomes, potentially reducing conflict and enhancing understanding.

How does CADI help professionals and individuals?

Professionals have shared their experiences of how the CADI framework has demonstrated its capacity to enhance career development practice through the provision of more flexible and accessible language, and through their feedback we have identified three key mechanisms through which this enhanced accessibility is achieved.

Reduced complexity and cognitive load

The cluster framework addresses a common challenge in career development: the overwhelming nature of occupational choice when presented with extensive lists of specific job titles. By condensing the complexity of career options into six key terms, CADI reduces the cognitive load associated with career exploration and decision-making (Guyan, 2014). This simplification may help prevent vocational identity foreclosure, where individuals make premature career commitments to avoid the anxiety of extensive exploration, and vocational identity diffusion, where individuals become overwhelmed and avoid making any career-related decisions (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). The reduced complexity particularly benefits family engagement in career conversations; as discussed in the individual guidance and family engagement sections, when family members can engage with six accessible concepts rather than navigating extensive occupational classifications, they are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to career discussions.

Enhanced visibility of background roles

Traditional approaches to career education often emphasise highly visible occupations while rendering support and administrative roles invisible. This is demonstrated in the persistence of visible roles ('doctor', 'lawyer', 'sports person') in the most quoted occupational expectations of teenagers (OECD, 2025). The cluster framework addresses this limitation by encouraging comprehensive representation of all ways of working within any given context. For example, when primary schools arrange visits from emergency services, the typical approach involves firefighters demonstrating equipment and discussing their roles. A cluster-informed approach might involve the fire station sending representatives from multiple clusters: a Maker (maintenance technician), a Coordinator (station manager), a Guardian (firefighter), and a Linker (community liaison officer). This comprehensive representation, as discussed in the workforce development section, helps individuals understand the full ecosystem of roles within industries and organisations.

Inclusive and person-first language

The cluster framework employs person-first language that positions individuals as the authors of their career narratives. Rather than defining people by occupational titles or institutional categories, the clusters describe ways of working that individuals can choose to identify with or move between throughout their careers, and this approach aligns with principles of inclusive career development that emphasise individual agency (Arthur, 2024). The person-first approach becomes particularly significant when working with populations who may have experienced exclusion from traditional career pathways. By focusing on how individuals prefer to work rather than what jobs they can access, the framework centres capability and preference over external constraints or historical limitations, and this positioning supports the development of authentic and sustainable career narratives that reflect individual strengths and aspirations.

The limitations of the CADI model

As a relatively recent development in career development practice, CADI requires further empirical investigation to establish its long-term effectiveness and optimal applications. The examples of framework application presented here are drawn from case studies provided by educators, counsellors, and institutions who have implemented CADI within their contexts, but systematic research is needed to examine its impact on career decision-making processes, identity development, and career outcomes over time.

Beyond research needs, several practical limitations warrant consideration. While CADI has been designed to be an inclusive framework, by its very nature it creates artificial groupings of individuals which may lead to the development of in-group bias, out-group exclusion, and the creation of new assumptions. The same aspects of SIT that simplify the process could inadvertently cause new stereotypes to develop, and this risk should be continually evaluated by those using the framework (Dunham, 2018). Additionally, situations may arise where individuals' cluster identification conflicts with existing career plans or family expectations, particularly when cluster preferences differ from culturally prescribed career paths, requiring careful facilitation to explore the complexity of career motivation beyond work preferences. The framework's emphasis on counsellor and educator discretion, while strengths-based, also presents challenges in ensuring consistent and appropriate application across different contexts and client populations.

As a practice-based framework developed through iterative implementation, CADI should be understood as a living model that can evolve in response to user feedback and emerging evidence. For instance, the current use of role-based nouns (Maker, Guardian, etc.) could potentially be reconsidered in favour of action-based language (e.g., 'making', 'caring', 'linking') to further emphasise dynamic ways of working rather than potentially fixed identity categories. This flexibility to adapt language choices aligns with the framework's core principle of responsive design that serves diverse populations rather than constraining them. Non-linguistic aspects of the clusters could also be developed to support those who rely more heavily on non-linguistic cognitive processes; these could, for example, include the provision of visual tools that align with the clusters and preferred ways of working which might be more suitable for non-verbal neurodivergent individuals (Fedorenko & Varley, 2016; O'Rourke & Coderre, 2021).

Implications for research and policy

This work presents several implications for career development research and policy. Future research could examine how professionals integrate linguistic frameworks into existing approaches, with particular attention to cultural adaptation and effectiveness across diverse populations. Longitudinal research examining relationships between cluster identification and career satisfaction, adaptability, and wellbeing would provide valuable evidence about long-term impacts. More broadly, researchers studying career development could benefit from greater attention to linguistic frameworks and social identity processes, investigating how language choices shape narrative construction and vocational identity formation across demographic and socioeconomic contexts.

For policy makers, this work suggests the importance of considering language framework choices in curriculum development and career guidance policy. This may require systematic review of existing language structures and occupational classifications to identify potential exclusionary effects and develop more inclusive alternatives. Similarly, professional qualification providers should consider incorporating linguistic awareness and inclusive language competencies into training frameworks for career development professionals. Such policy attention to language choice could support more equitable career development outcomes while advancing the profession's social justice mission across educational, counselling, and workforce development contexts.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that language in career development practice shapes the boundaries of what individuals perceive as possible within their professional trajectories. Inherited linguistic frameworks, designed for administrative rather than developmental purposes, can systematically constrain career possibilities, particularly for marginalised groups. CADI offers a deliberate response to these limitations, providing an inclusive framework that prioritises individual agency whilst maintaining accessibility across diverse cultural contexts. The practical applications detailed in this article demonstrate that inclusive language frameworks can be implemented across diverse contexts.

The broader significance of this work lies in positioning career development as a political practice. By making visible how language can expand or constrain possibilities, this article challenges us all to recognise our role not as neutral facilitators but as active participants in either perpetuating or disrupting systems of linguistic exclusion. As the world of work continues evolving rapidly, the need for adaptive, inclusive language frameworks becomes increasingly urgent. The evidence suggests that inclusive language is essential for advancing the profession's capacity to serve its social justice mission, empowering individuals to author career narratives that are both sustainable and authentically representative of their unique engagement with the world of work.



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