

# Development of a Mental Imagery Training Package for the Career Development of Unemployed Youth

Shahriar. Shiaraninezhad<sup>1</sup>, Zahra. Yousefi<sup>2\*</sup>, Mohsen. Golparvar<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Assistance Professor, Department of Cilinical Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Professor, Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran Research Center for Behavioral and Psychological Science, Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: Dr\_yousefi@iau.ac.ir

### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### Section:

Occupational and Organizational  
Counseling

#### How to cite this article:

Shiaraninezhad, S., Yousefi, Z., & Golparvar, M. (2026). Development of a Mental Imagery Training Package for the Career Development of Unemployed Youth. *KMAN Conseling and Psychology Nexus*, 4, 1-18.

<http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ooc.psynexus.5894>



© 2026 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to develop a mental imagery training package for the career development of unemployed youth. The research method was conventional content analysis based on the approach proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The research corpus comprised all texts related to mental imagery and the career development of unemployed individuals that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The research instrument consisted of a line-by-line examination of the texts, and the data were analyzed using the five-stage method developed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The results of the psychological content analysis of unemployment revealed three concepts: (1) causes of unemployment, (2) foundational pillars of career development, and (3) components of career development for unemployed individuals. The content analysis of mental imagery also revealed three concepts: (1) psychopathology, (2) goals of positive mental imagery, and (3) strategies. Following the content analysis of the texts, the process of adapting the mental imagery method to unemployment was conducted according to the approach proposed by Yousefi and Golparvar (2023). This stage resulted in the development of eight 90-minute training sessions incorporating positive mental imagery content for career development. Mental imagery for securing employment, increasing self-efficacy, and enhancing employability capacity was addressed by modifying four categories of imagery: intrusive mental images, employment-related images that trigger maladaptive emotions, paralyzing images that inhibit practical career-related action, and disconnected images in the domain of employability and career-development skill enhancement. Corrective strategies capable of improving career development were also examined based on the concepts extracted from the texts. Cognitive restructuring, physiological-emotional regulation, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and experiential-perceptual strategies were selected as frameworks for skill modification. Content-validity assessment by experts using the content validity ratio indicated that the package possessed satisfactory content validity (CVR = .98). Based on these findings, the package may proceed to the stage of examining its implementation validity.

**Keywords:** unemployment, mental imagery, career development

## 1. Introduction

Unemployment is not merely the absence of paid work; it is a multidimensional psychosocial condition that can affect identity, perceived social worth, emotional stability, interpersonal functioning, and expectations about the future. Classical economic accounts have emphasized structural imbalances between labor supply and demand, fluctuations in production, and deficiencies in employment opportunities, yet contemporary psychological approaches increasingly recognize that unemployment is also experienced as a disruption in agency, belonging, and personal continuity (Blustein, 2013; Pigou, 2013). From the perspective of the psychology of working, employment provides not only financial resources but also opportunities for social connection, self-determination, competence development, and participation in collective life. Consequently, prolonged exclusion from work may compromise several fundamental psychological needs and intensify individuals' vulnerability to distress, passivity, and social marginalization (Kossen & McIlveen, 2018). The subjective meaning of unemployment is therefore particularly important, because people do not respond solely to the objective loss of income; they also respond to the perceived loss of status, purpose, routine, competence, and personal value. Qualitative examinations of unemployed individuals' experiences suggest that questions such as "What am I worth?" may become central to their self-evaluation, especially when job rejection is interpreted as evidence of personal inadequacy rather than as the result of complex labor-market conditions (Pultz & Hansen, 2026).

The psychological consequences of unemployment develop over time and may begin even before employment is formally lost. Anticipation of unemployment can generate fear and uncertainty, the initial transition may produce an acute emotional reaction, and the subsequent period may involve either partial adaptation or sustained deterioration in well-being (Von Scheve et al., 2017). Unemployment has also been associated with changes in personality-related functioning, particularly when individuals remain exposed to financial strain, repeated rejection, reduced social participation, and limited opportunities for mastery (Boyce et al., 2015). Emotional distress may appear in the form of anxiety, depressed mood, irritability, helplessness, shame, and diminished motivation. In addition, unemployed individuals may experience reduced confidence in their capacity to influence future outcomes, which can impair job-search persistence and reinforce avoidance. This pattern is

especially concerning because emotional dysregulation can undermine concentration, decision-making, social interaction, and the ability to respond constructively to rejection. Recent evidence indicates that interventions directly targeting emotion regulation among unemployed adults may reduce psychological vulnerability and improve adaptive functioning during the job-search process (Ramos & Cunha, 2026). Accordingly, any comprehensive career-development intervention for unemployed youth should address not only occupational information and job-search techniques but also the emotional processes that influence readiness for action.

The relationship between unemployment and career development is reciprocal. Unemployment may weaken confidence, career identity, and future orientation, while inadequate career-development resources may prolong unemployment by reducing the effectiveness of exploration, planning, networking, and decision-making. Skill deficits and mismatches between individuals' competencies and labor-market demands represent major barriers to employment, particularly in rapidly changing economic and technological environments (Misra et al., 2022). Career readiness now requires more than possession of formal qualifications. Individuals are expected to acquire updated knowledge, manage information, recognize emerging occupational opportunities, develop transferable skills, and continuously adapt their professional profiles. Reviews of knowledge management and career readiness have emphasized the importance of acquiring, organizing, sharing, and applying knowledge in ways that strengthen employability and support effective transitions between education and work (Raut et al., 2024). Digital learning competencies and technology-mediated professional development are also increasingly relevant, because job searching, networking, training, and career counseling frequently occur through online platforms (Zimmer & Matthews, 2022). These developments indicate that unemployed youth require a combination of psychological readiness, adaptive learning capacity, digital competence, and labor-market awareness.

Career development is a continuous process through which individuals construct vocational identities, explore alternatives, evaluate personal and contextual resources, and translate career intentions into purposeful action. For unemployed individuals, this process may be disrupted by negative self-appraisals, uncertainty regarding occupational identity, unrealistic expectations, reduced perceived control, and limited access to professional networks. Career

adaptability is particularly important because it reflects the psychosocial resources needed to manage vocational tasks, transitions, and disruptions. Interventions informed by life-design and career-construction principles have demonstrated that structured career counseling can strengthen vocational identity, adaptability, and career decision-making self-efficacy (Cardoso et al., 2022). Group life-design counseling has likewise been used to improve the employability of disadvantaged young adults by helping participants reconstruct career narratives, identify personal strengths, and connect past experiences with future occupational possibilities (Maree et al., 2019). Similarly, career-construction interventions with urban youth have shown that group-based narrative and reflective activities can promote career agency and facilitate more coherent vocational self-concepts (Cadaret & Hartung, 2020). These findings support the development of interventions that integrate self-awareness, meaning construction, future orientation, and practical career action.

Career counseling research also demonstrates that employability is not a single trait but a multidimensional set of personal and contextual resources. An integrative review of career interventions for unemployed individuals found that effective programs commonly address self-knowledge, career exploration, decision-making, job-search behavior, adaptability, psychological support, and employability-related competencies (de Carvalho et al., 2024). Longitudinal evidence further suggests that group career interventions can strengthen employability resources among unemployed adults and that these effects may extend beyond the immediate conclusion of the program (Carvalho et al., 2025). Process-oriented studies comparing face-to-face and online formats have also indicated that group career interventions may be delivered through different modalities while preserving important therapeutic and developmental mechanisms, such as participation, reflection, mutual support, and commitment to action (de Carvalho et al., 2025). Meta-analytic evidence concerning online career counseling similarly suggests that digitally delivered interventions can improve career-related psychological outcomes when they are structured, theoretically grounded, and actively engage participants (Yiğit et al., 2026). Thus, a training package designed for unemployed youth should be sufficiently structured for standardized implementation while remaining adaptable to both in-person and online delivery.

Several intervention approaches have been developed to strengthen career-related motivation, hope, engagement, and

adaptability. Positive career counseling has been associated with improvements in career decision-making and future orientation, both of which are essential for unemployed youth who may perceive their future as uncertain or uncontrollable (Maisarah & Chen, 2025). Career excellence training has also been shown to enhance work motivation and work engagement, suggesting that focused educational interventions can activate motivational resources relevant to employment and occupational persistence (Askari et al., 2025). Meaning-centered career interventions may improve subjective career success and career resilience by helping individuals connect work-related goals with broader personal values and sources of meaning (Malekian & Abedi, 2024). Career narrative therapy can similarly reduce psychological distress and strengthen career hope by enabling individuals to reinterpret career experiences and construct more adaptive future narratives (Abdollahi et al., 2024). Flourishing-oriented training and transactional analysis have also been examined as methods for improving career optimism and readiness for the transition from university to work (Rouhafza & Aghili, 2026). Together, these studies indicate that career interventions are more effective when they do not merely transmit occupational information but actively reshape how individuals understand themselves, their possibilities, and their capacity for future action.

Career self-efficacy is a central mechanism in this process. Individuals who believe they can make effective career decisions, acquire required skills, and cope with occupational obstacles are more likely to engage in exploration and persistent job-search behavior. Solution-focused career counseling has been found to increase career decision-making self-efficacy by directing attention toward resources, exceptions, attainable goals, and practical steps (Rafiola et al., 2023). Social-cognitive career counseling has also demonstrated benefits for self-efficacy and psychological vitality, particularly when interventions help participants identify barriers, strengthen outcome expectations, and regulate goal-directed behavior (Khabaz Shirazi et al., 2021). In employed populations, job-crafting-based and social-cognitive career counseling approaches have been used to improve work engagement by encouraging individuals to actively reshape tasks, relationships, and perceptions of work (Mousavi Dastjerdi et al., 2026). Although job crafting is typically studied among employees, its underlying emphasis on proactive agency is relevant to unemployed youth, who similarly need to

reconstruct their relationship with career opportunities, learning tasks, and future work roles.

Career guidance services are especially significant during adolescence and emerging adulthood, when individuals are forming occupational identities and preparing for the transition into the labor market. Effective school-based guidance and counseling can improve students' understanding of career options, decision-making capacity, and readiness to manage educational and occupational transitions (Sahito et al., 2025). Nevertheless, many young people enter unemployment without adequate preparation for repeated rejection, uncertainty, skill mismatch, and the emotional demands of job seeking. They may possess general knowledge about employment but lack the psychological capacity to imagine themselves succeeding in interviews, navigating professional networks, acquiring unfamiliar competencies, or sustaining effort over time. This gap between knowing what to do and being able to enact it suggests the need for interventions that bridge cognition, emotion, and behavior. Mental imagery may offer such a bridge because it allows individuals to simulate experiences, activate emotional responses, rehearse behavior, and modify expectations before encountering real-world situations.

Mental imagery refers to perceptual-like experiences that occur in the absence of corresponding external sensory input. It is not limited to visual images but may include auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and emotional components. Contemporary philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific accounts describe mental imagery as a complex representational process closely connected to perception, memory, anticipation, emotion, and action planning (Nanay, 2023). Because imagery often resembles actual experience more closely than verbal thought, it can exert a powerful influence on emotion and behavior. Mental images may reactivate autobiographical memories, intensify beliefs, evoke physiological arousal, and shape expectations regarding future events. Consequently, imagery can either support adaptation or reinforce dysfunction, depending on its content, vividness, meaning, and emotional associations.

The role of mental imagery in emotional disorders has been extensively documented. Distressing images may maintain anxiety, depression, shame, trauma-related reactions, and avoidance by repeatedly presenting negative scenarios as if they were immediate or probable realities (Holmes & Mathews, 2010). For unemployed individuals, recurrent images of failure, humiliation, rejection, incompetence, or an unattainable ideal future may reinforce maladaptive core beliefs and inhibit practical engagement

with career tasks. For example, mentally replaying unsuccessful interviews may strengthen the expectation of future rejection, whereas imagining an ideal career without concrete intermediate steps may create a disconnected fantasy that does not support action. In contrast, adaptive imagery can help individuals rehearse coping responses, approach feared tasks, regulate emotion, and develop more attainable future representations. This dual role makes mental imagery a particularly relevant target for career-development interventions.

Positive mental imagery has been shown to influence mood, motivation, and behavior. Experimental research indicates that generating positive images can improve affective states and increase behavior consistent with positive expectations (Pictet et al., 2011). Positive imagery may also remain effective when individuals experience dysphoric mood, suggesting that the deliberate construction of adaptive images can counteract some effects of negative emotional states (Grol et al., 2017). Positive psychology interventions that incorporate imagery have been associated with increased well-being, although outcomes may depend partly on the individual's capacity to generate vivid and personally meaningful mental images (Odou & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). The application of positive psychology and imagery techniques has also been examined in contexts involving psychological recovery and mental health, including among injured athletes, where imagery can support emotional adjustment, confidence, and adaptive focus (Mahini & Aghi Aghdasi, 2025). These findings suggest that positive imagery may be adapted to employment-related contexts to promote confidence, motivation, emotional regulation, and realistic anticipation of successful career behavior.

Imagery-based interventions are not limited to the generation of pleasant scenes. They may involve imagery rescripting, attentional redirection, physiological regulation, step-by-step mental rehearsal, and modification of the meaning attached to distressing images. Imagery-based cognitive therapy has been used to reduce emotional dysregulation and mood instability by changing recurrent emotional images and strengthening more adaptive representations (Paulet & Weiner, 2025). Such methods may be particularly useful for unemployed youth who experience intense reactions to job-search situations or who avoid action because they mentally simulate failure. By rehearsing the stages of writing an application, attending an interview, communicating with employers, or managing rejection, individuals may reduce uncertainty and improve behavioral

preparedness. In addition, imagery can be linked to relaxation, emotion regulation, and self-compassion, allowing participants to approach career tasks without becoming overwhelmed by physiological arousal.

A theoretically grounded mental imagery package for career development should therefore address both harmful and constructive imagery. Harmful imagery may include trauma-reproducing images based on previous rejection, images that activate maladaptive emotions and negative core beliefs, paralyzing images that generate avoidance, and disconnected images of success that are not linked to effort or realistic planning. Constructive imagery should focus on strengthening an empowered self-image, improving career self-awareness, rehearsing adaptive job-search behavior, developing labor-market readiness, managing resources, and transforming career goals into concrete action. Such a package should also integrate career-development components such as self-knowledge, continuous learning, mental health, social and relational capital, adaptability, planning, and personal organization. By combining these elements, mental imagery can function not as an isolated relaxation technique but as a structured mechanism for cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and perceptual change.

Developing a new training package requires a rigorous method for identifying concepts, organizing content, and establishing validity. Conventional qualitative content analysis is appropriate when researchers seek to systematically derive categories and concepts from relevant texts while remaining close to the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach allows the identification of recurring patterns in the literature on unemployment, career development, and mental imagery and supports the translation of those patterns into educational objectives, strategies, and session content. Attention to validity and reliability is also essential, particularly through transparent coding, expert review, researcher triangulation, and careful examination of the consistency between extracted concepts and source materials (Noble & Smith, 2015). A valid package should additionally reflect the practical needs of unemployed individuals and be sufficiently coherent for subsequent evaluation in intervention studies.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to develop and establish the content validity of a mental imagery training package for the career development of unemployed youth.

**Table 1**

*Texts Related to Mental Imagery and Its Application in Treatment*

## 2. Methods and Materials

To address the first qualitative research question and identify the educational components of mental imagery for the career development of unemployed individuals, texts concerning career development among unemployed individuals and mental imagery were first analyzed through conventional content analysis using the method proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). This design is applicable when theories and research texts related to the topic under investigation are available. In the present study, the concepts were derived from the examination of mental imagery and interviews with unemployed individuals. The findings were extracted for the purpose of career development, and the corresponding training package was subsequently developed.

### 2.1. Research Setting, Research Population, and Participant Selection in the Qualitative Phase

The research setting in the qualitative phase included all texts concerning mental imagery and career development among unemployed individuals. Purposive sampling was used to select the texts, and the number of texts was determined by recurrence and data saturation.

The texts were selected according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The inclusion criteria for texts were as follows:

1. Documents concerning mental imagery and career development that had been published in scientific and research journals.
2. Documents published during the preceding 15 years.
3. Domestic and international master's theses and doctoral dissertations concerning mental imagery and career development that had been published during the preceding 15 years.

The exclusion criteria for texts in the qualitative phase were as follows:

1. Relevant texts published in journals that were not classified as scientific research journals.
2. Undergraduate theses examining the study variables.
3. Materials published in online magazines.

Tables 1 and 2 present the texts related to each subject area, respectively.

| No. | Reference                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Ronen, T. (2011). <i>The positive power of imagery: Harnessing client imagination in CBT and related therapies</i> . John Wiley & Sons.                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2   | Ronen, J., Ronen, T., & Zhou, M. (2025). Images tell stories. <i>Financial Analysts Journal</i> , 81(2), 7–28.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 3   | Richardson, A. (2013). <i>Mental imagery</i> . Springer.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 4   | Pearson, J., Naselaris, T., Holmes, E. A., & Kosslyn, S. M. (2015). Mental imagery: Functional mechanisms and clinical applications. <i>Trends in Cognitive Sciences</i> , 19(10), 590–602.                                                                                                                                                      |
| 5   | Holmes, E. A., & Mathews, A. (2010). Mental imagery in emotion and emotional disorders. <i>Clinical Psychology Review</i> , 30(3), 349–362.                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 6   | Ebbinghaus, H. (2013). Memory: A contribution to experimental psychology. <i>Annals of Neurosciences</i> , 20(4), 155.                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 7   | Russell, B., & Baldwin, T. (2022). <i>The analysis of mind</i> . Routledge.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 8   | Saulsman, L. M., Ji, J. L., & McEvoy, P. M. (2019). The essential role of mental imagery in cognitive behaviour therapy: What is old is new again. <i>Australian Psychologist</i> , 54(4), 237–244.                                                                                                                                              |
| 9   | Toussaint, L., Nguyen, Q. A., Roettger, C., Dixon, K., Offenbächer, M., Kohls, N., et al. (2021). Effectiveness of progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and guided imagery in promoting psychological and physiological states of relaxation. <i>Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine</i> , 2021(1), Article 5924040. |
| 10  | Ji, J. L., Kavanagh, D. J., Holmes, E. A., MacLeod, C., & Di Simplicio, M. (2019). Mental imagery in psychiatry: Conceptual and clinical implications. <i>CNS Spectrums</i> , 24(1), 114–126.                                                                                                                                                    |
| 11  | Thomas, V. (2015). <i>Using mental imagery in counselling and psychotherapy: A guide to more inclusive theory and practice</i> . Routledge.                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 12  | Macfie, R. L., Hay, L. A., & Rodgers, P. (2023). A framework for understanding mental imagery in design cognition research. <i>Proceedings of the Design Society</i> , 3, 171–180.                                                                                                                                                               |

**Table 2***Selected Texts on the Career Development of Unemployed Individuals*

| No. | Reference                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | de Carvalho, C. L., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2024). Integrative review on career interventions with unemployed people: Nature, outcomes, and recommendations. <i>Journal of Employment Counseling</i> , 61(1), 18–45.                                                   |
| 2   | Blustein, D. L., Connors-Kellgren, A., Olle, C., & Diamonti, A. J. (2017). Promising career and workforce development programs and services in supporting the needs of unemployed populations. In <i>The handbook of career and workforce development</i> (pp. 97–123).           |
| 3   | Okolie, U. C., Nwajiuba, C. A., Binuomote, M. O., Ehiobuche, C., Igu, N. C. N., & Ajoke, O. S. (2020). Career training with mentoring programs in higher education: Facilitating career development and employability of graduates. <i>Education + Training</i> , 62(3), 214–234. |
| 4   | Dippo, D. (2024). Career development and the commodification of student labour in Canadian approaches to youth unemployment. In <i>Youth, unemployment and training</i> (pp. 161–178). Routledge.                                                                                 |
| 5   | Basbug, G., & Sharone, O. (2024). Job search interventions for long-term unemployed job seekers: Comparing approaches to effective support. <i>Journal of Career Development</i> , 51(6), 660–674.                                                                                |
| 6   | Drosos, N., Theodoroulakis, M., Antoniou, A. S., & Rajter, I. C. (2021). Career services in the post-COVID-19 era: A paradigm for career counseling unemployed individuals. <i>Journal of Employment Counseling</i> , 58(1), 36–48.                                               |
| 7   | Amundson, N., Goddard, T., Yoon, H. J., & Niles, S. (2018). Hope-centred interventions with unemployed clients. <i>Canadian Journal of Career Development</i> , 17(2), 87–98.                                                                                                     |
| 8   | Carvalho, C. L. D., Marôco, J., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2025). Employability resources of unemployed adults: Longitudinal effects of a group career intervention. <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> , 16, Article 1470611.                                                |
| 9   | de Carvalho, C. L., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2025). Face-to-face and online group career intervention for unemployed individuals: A process study. <i>Journal of Employment Counseling</i> , 62(2), 78–102.                                                             |
| 10  | Maree, J. G. (2022). The outcomes of a mixed-methods, innovative group life design intervention with unemployed youths. <i>International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance</i> , 22(3), 667–687.                                                                    |
| 11  | de Carvalho, C. L., Sampaio, C., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2025). The qualitative outcomes of a group career intervention for unemployed individuals: One-year follow-up interview. <i>The Career Development Quarterly</i> , 73(2), 92–104.                             |
| 12  | Bhat, C. S. (2010). Assisting unemployed adults find suitable work: A group intervention embedded in community and grounded in social action. <i>The Journal for Specialists in Group Work</i> , 35(3), 246–254.                                                                  |
| 13  | Jahn, H. J., & Holleder, A. (2025). The health benefits of the JOBS Program Germany for unemployed people: A 6-month follow-up study. <i>Journal of Public Health</i> , 33(10), 1–16.                                                                                             |
| 14  | Rotar, L. J. (2021). Evaluation of the effectiveness of an employment programme for young unemployed people. <i>Engineering Economics</i> , 32(1), 60–69.                                                                                                                         |

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, 12 texts concerning the mental imagery method were selected. Although data saturation was reached after the ninth text, the number of selected texts was increased to 12. Regarding the career development of unemployed individuals, data saturation was reached after the 11th text; nevertheless, the number of texts was increased to 14.

## 2.2. Research Instrument in the Qualitative Phase

The research instrument in the qualitative phase consisted of a detailed examination of the texts, during which key and important statements were recorded. After the sources to be analyzed had been identified, a guide for searching and extracting information from each category of texts was

developed under the supervision of the academic supervisor and advisor. This guide specified the issues to which the researcher should attend within each category of texts. The sources were then examined line by line, reviewed in terms of content, subjected to content analysis, and coded. The resulting materials were subsequently presented to the academic supervisor and advisor for review. At this stage, the coherence and consistency of the data in terms of meaning and conceptual content were examined, while clear distinctions were established among the identified contents. In the next stage, the sources were carefully reviewed with the assistance of the academic supervisor and advisor, and the concepts derived for both subject areas were reconsidered. It should be noted that the data were analyzed concurrently with their collection. In other words, reciprocal interaction occurred between what was already known and what needed to be known, accompanied by repeated movement between the data and the analysis. This process constitutes the essence of achieving validity and reliability. In the present study, data collection and analysis were likewise conducted concurrently, with repeated iterative movement between the data and the codes.

### 2.3. *Validity and Reliability of the Qualitative Findings*

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the following criteria were observed (Noble & Smith, 2015):

**Utility:** Because the purpose of this study was to develop mental imagery training for the career development of unemployed individuals, the findings may help inform counselors and clients about ways to improve their circumstances and modify their self-concepts.

**Contextual integrity:** The phenomenon under investigation was examined within its relevant context. To meet this criterion, all pertinent variables were considered in the present study to provide a more comprehensive description of the context under investigation.

**Reporting method:** The reporting style should enable other specialists and stakeholders to understand the research findings effectively. In this study, an effort was made to present the qualitative findings in tabular form to facilitate comprehension.

Finally, researcher triangulation was employed by involving different individuals in coding and analyzing the data. In the present study, the interviews were coded by the researcher, whereas data analysis was conducted by the researcher, the academic supervisor, and a specialist in qualitative research coding.

### 2.4. *Procedure*

Following initial consultation sessions and a detailed examination of content-analysis strategies, the procedure for selecting texts relevant to both subject areas was determined. A text-review guide was developed, and the selection of texts based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria continued until data saturation was reached. The texts were then examined in detail according to the review guide, content analysis was performed, and the components of mental imagery and career development for unemployed individuals were extracted.

### 2.5. *Data Analysis*

In summary, because the study employed content analysis, the data obtained from texts concerning mental imagery and career development among unemployed individuals were analyzed using the five-stage method proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), as follows:

1. Determining and extracting the units of analysis as the principal conceptual units;
2. Extracting all sub-concepts associated with the principal concepts;
3. Relating the sub-concepts to the foundational concepts;
4. Providing examples and instances for the foundational concepts; and
5. Examining the consistency of coding and conceptualization with the existing texts through preliminary review by the academic supervisor and a qualitative research specialist, followed by drawing conclusions based on the coding and categorization.

### 2.6. *Package Development and Validation Process*

After the principal concepts and their sub-concepts had been extracted in the two specified domains, the sessions of the mental imagery training package for the career development of unemployed individuals were developed according to the method proposed by Yousefi and Golparvar (2023), as follows:

**Step 1:** At this stage, the research team repeatedly reviewed the concepts and sub-concepts extracted from the content analysis of the texts concerning the mental imagery package for the career development of unemployed individuals and identified the concepts appropriate for inclusion in the training package.

**Step 2:** At this stage, the research team selected the concepts and sub-concepts extracted from the content analysis for inclusion in the training package and established the objectives of the package.

**Steps 3 and 4:** At this stage, the research team selected the strategies and techniques required for each objective from mentalization theory in accordance with the objectives.

**Step 4:** At this stage, the research team determined the number of sessions, the time required for each topic, and the prioritization of the topics.

**Step 5:** The content of the training package was developed and prepared according to APA guidelines, including behavioral definitions, objective specification, and the determination of strategies and techniques for each session, under the supervision of the academic supervisor and advisor.

**Step 6:** At this stage, the process and content of the training package were validated by career-counseling specialists. Interrater agreement was used to validate the developed package. Accordingly, the training package and the educational process and content evaluation form were provided to specialists in career counseling, who were asked

to evaluate the package in terms of its objectives, techniques, and time allocation. Seven career-counseling specialists with more than five years of professional experience in this field were selected. After they completed the package-evaluation form, the content validity ratio was calculated.

### 3. Findings and Results

In summary, because the research method was content analysis, the five-stage method proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was used to analyze the data, as follows:

All conceptual units were extracted from the selected texts. All sub-concepts related to the principal concepts were then identified. The concepts were organized into categories and subsequently into codes. To examine the consistency of the coding and categorization with the relevant theories, the extracted concepts were preliminarily reviewed by the academic supervisor. The validity and reliability of the coding were evaluated by all members of the research team, excluding the student researcher, and conclusions were drawn based on the coding and categorization.

**Table 3**

*Content Analysis of Texts Concerning the Psychological Dimensions of Unemployment and Career Development*

| No. | Main Concepts                        | Sub-Concepts                            | Codes                                                                                                                                   |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Psychological causes of unemployment | Cognitive causes                        | Incompetence and defect schema                                                                                                          |
|     |                                      |                                         | Cognitive bias, including noticing failures while disregarding successes                                                                |
|     |                                      |                                         | Analysis paralysis, involving excessive consideration of negative consequences and consequent failure to act                            |
|     |                                      |                                         | A distorted mental model of the labor market, including unrealistic or catastrophic perceptions of recruitment and employment processes |
|     |                                      | Emotional causes and affective state    | Performance anxiety                                                                                                                     |
|     |                                      |                                         | Depression and lack of motivation                                                                                                       |
|     |                                      |                                         | Failure-related psychological trauma arising from adverse past experiences                                                              |
|     |                                      |                                         | Self-distrust and learned helplessness                                                                                                  |
|     |                                      | Behavioral causes and habitual patterns | Avoidant behaviors, including avoiding learning, professional social networks, checking, and follow-up activities                       |
|     |                                      |                                         | Delaying the completion of essential tasks                                                                                              |
|     |                                      | Family-related causes                   | Inappropriate job-search patterns and aimless, scattered efforts                                                                        |
|     |                                      |                                         | Excessive pressure or excessive support                                                                                                 |
|     |                                      |                                         | Family-transmitted negative beliefs about money, work, or success                                                                       |
|     |                                      |                                         | Absence of a role model within the family                                                                                               |
|     |                                      |                                         | Highly controlling or neglectful parenting patterns that are inconsistent with career autonomy                                          |
|     |                                      | Social causes                           | Social labeling and pressure resulting from the stigma of unemployment                                                                  |
|     |                                      |                                         | Skills gap and mismatch between received education and labor-market requirements                                                        |

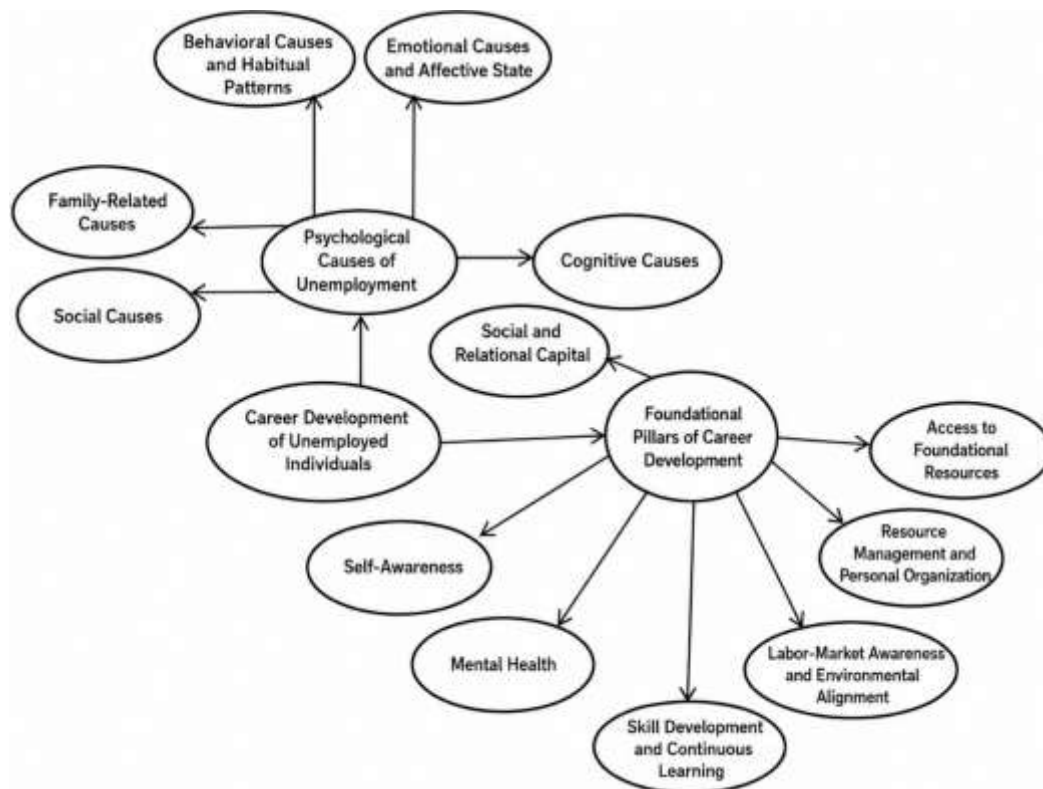
|   |                                                 |                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                |
|---|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Absence of social networks, relationships, and professional connections that facilitate entry into employment                                  |
| 2 | Foundational pillars of career development      | Access to foundational resources                                               | Structured self-knowledge                                                                                                                      |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Recognition of soft and hard competencies                                                                                                      |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Recognition of core values                                                                                                                     |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Recognition of limitations                                                                                                                     |
|   |                                                 | Resource management and personal organization                                  | Time management and daily routines related to career readiness                                                                                 |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Energy management                                                                                                                              |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Self-discipline                                                                                                                                |
|   |                                                 | Skill acquisition and continuous learning                                      | Self-directed learning                                                                                                                         |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Critical thinking                                                                                                                              |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Learning intelligence                                                                                                                          |
|   |                                                 | Mental health                                                                  | Emotion regulation                                                                                                                             |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Self-compassion                                                                                                                                |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Stress resilience                                                                                                                              |
|   |                                                 | Social and relational capital                                                  | Communication skills                                                                                                                           |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Networking skills                                                                                                                              |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Digital identity and management of one's online professional profile                                                                           |
| 3 | Career development among unemployed individuals | Self-awareness                                                                 | Clarification of career values and identification of what is important to the individual                                                       |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Exploration of interests and preferences                                                                                                       |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Identification of competencies and skills                                                                                                      |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Career identity, including answering the question, "Who am I in the world of work?"                                                            |
|   |                                                 | Labor-market and environmental awareness and alignment with external realities | Awareness and understanding of trends, growing industries, and declining industries                                                            |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Skills-gap analysis and continuous comparison between the individual's current competencies and labor-market requirements                      |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Development of social capital and attention to relational networks                                                                             |
|   |                                                 | Career adaptability                                                            | Concern for and planning toward the future                                                                                                     |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Control and a sense of responsibility                                                                                                          |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Curiosity                                                                                                                                      |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Confidence                                                                                                                                     |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Commitment                                                                                                                                     |
|   |                                                 | Planning and transforming awareness into action                                | Goal setting and the use of scientific models to transform career aspirations into milestones                                                  |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Resource management, including time, mental energy, and personal budgeting for the learning pathway and, when necessary, corrective repetition |
|   |                                                 |                                                                                | Feedback systems, including the capacity to receive criticism after interviews or training courses                                             |

As shown in the table, the main concepts were divided into three categories: (1) causes of unemployment, including the sub-concepts of cognitive causes, emotional causes and affective state, behavioral causes and habitual patterns, and family-related and social causes; (2) foundational pillars of career development, including foundational requirements, resource management and personal organization, continuous learning, mental health, and social and relational capital; and (3) components of career development for unemployed

individuals, including self-knowledge and self-awareness, awareness of the labor market and environment and alignment with external realities, career adaptability, planning and transforming awareness into action, mental health, skill acquisition and continuous learning, resource management and personal organization, social and relational capital, labor-market awareness and alignment, and adaptability. Figure 1 presents a diagram of this content analysis.

**Figure 1**

*Schematic representation of the psychological concepts associated with the career development of unemployed individuals.*

**Table 4**

*Results of the Content Analysis of Mental Imagery Texts*

| No. | Main Concepts           | Sub-Concepts                                                                  | Codes                                                                                                                                  |
|-----|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Psychopathology         | Images that reproduce psychological trauma                                    | Impaired realistic recollection of events                                                                                              |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Intrusive mental representations                                                                                                       |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Constructing mental images consistent with negative core beliefs                                                                       |
|     |                         | Imagery that triggers maladaptive emotions and confirms negative core beliefs | Constructing mental images of humiliation, blame, and failure                                                                          |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Negative imagery of the endpoint and outcome of an activity                                                                            |
|     |                         | Paralyzing imagery                                                            | Negative mental imagery that produces avoidance                                                                                        |
|     |                         | Disconnected imagery                                                          | Imagery that obstructs effective performance                                                                                           |
| 2   | Goals of mental imagery | Modification of the mental model                                              | Imagery of an unattainable ideal life                                                                                                  |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Idealized imagery without effort                                                                                                       |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Schema modification to revise images related to failure or incapacity through problem-solving, skills, and competencies                |
|     |                         | Physiological goals related to nervous-system regulation                      | Reduction of bias and redirection of attention from threats toward opportunities                                                       |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Management of trauma and memories by modifying a distressing image and transforming it from an open wound into a nonthreatening memory |
|     |                         | Functional goals                                                              | Shifting the state from survival to growth through activation of the sympathetic nervous system to reduce cortisol                     |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Preparing the nervous system through repeated successful imagery, thereby “warming up” the brain to confront reality                   |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Reducing performance anxiety by mentally progressing through the stages of a challenge to overcome ambiguity and fear of the unknown   |
|     |                         |                                                                               | Improving concentration and accuracy and using step-by-step imagery of skills to improve actual performance                            |

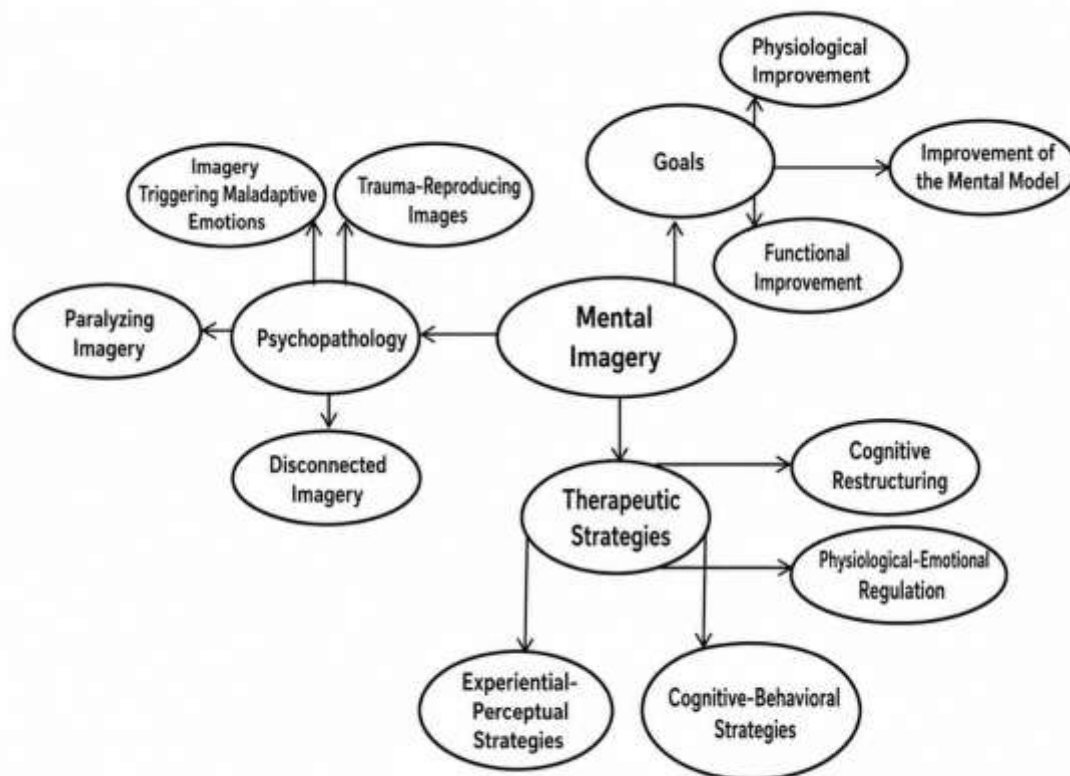
|   |                                    |                         |                                                                                                                            |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3 | Therapeutic strategies             | Cognitive restructuring | Imagery rescripting                                                                                                        |
|   |                                    |                         | Attentional redirection                                                                                                    |
|   |                                    |                         | Tension reduction through mental imagery                                                                                   |
|   | Physiological-emotional regulation |                         | Modification of the meaning of the image                                                                                   |
|   |                                    |                         | Image-based emotion regulation                                                                                             |
|   |                                    |                         | Enhancement of autonomic interventions to stimulate the autonomic nervous system                                           |
|   | Cognitive-behavioral strategies    |                         | Creation of a safe and controlled mental space to reduce high levels of arousal                                            |
|   |                                    |                         | Step-by-step mental rehearsal of a task or new skill to strengthen neural pathways and reduce performance anxiety          |
|   |                                    |                         | Mental simulation and rehearsal of social interactions or challenging situations to improve communication skills           |
|   | Experiential-perceptual strategies |                         | Increasing voluntary control by practicing the conscious generation or suppression of mental images                        |
|   |                                    |                         | Clarifying techniques for modifying image details to prevent catastrophic imagery from interfering with perceptual reality |

As shown in the table, the main concepts were divided into three categories: (1) psychopathology, including images that reproduce psychological trauma, imagery that triggers maladaptive emotions and confirms negative core beliefs, disconnected imagery, and paralyzing imagery; (2) goals of positive mental imagery, including modification of the

mental model, nervous-system regulation, and functional goals; and (3) strategies, including cognitive restructuring, physiological-emotional regulation, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and experiential-perceptual strategies. Figure 2 presents a diagram of this content analysis.

**Figure 2**

*Schematic representation of mental imagery concepts.*



To determine the structure and content of the mental imagery training package designed specifically for the career development of unemployed individuals, the six-stage method proposed by Yousefi and Golparvar (2023, as cited in Motavalli Bashi Naeini et al., 2025) was used, as described below:

**Step 1:** The principal and subsidiary concepts extracted from the content analysis of texts concerning mental imagery and unemployment were repeatedly reviewed, and the concepts requiring attention were listed. At this stage, the researchers decided to use mental imagery strategies to improve skills related to the foundational pillars of career development.

**Step 2:** At this stage, the objective of the package was to develop an empowered self-image, enhance job-search skills, and increase job-search self-efficacy and employability by modifying four categories of imagery: intrusive mental images, mental images associated with maladaptive career-related emotional triggers, paralyzing images that inhibit practical career-related action, and disconnected images related to employability and career-development skills. Corrective strategies capable of improving career development were also examined based on

the extracted concepts. Cognitive restructuring, physiological-emotional regulation, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and experiential-perceptual strategies were selected as frameworks for skill modification.

**Step 3:** Mental imagery strategies were aligned with career-development concepts to increase the likelihood of obtaining employment.

**Step 4:** The research team determined the number of sessions, the time required for each topic, and the prioritization of the training topics. One session was allocated to the psychological causes of unemployment and unemployment-related self-awareness, one session to the role of mental imagery in career readiness, two sessions to the management of harmful career-related mental imagery, and four sessions to career development through positive mental imagery. Each session lasted 90 minutes.

**Step 5:** The content of the training package was developed and prepared according to the guidelines of the American Psychological Association, including behavioral definitions, objective specification, and the identification of strategies and techniques for each session, under the supervision of the academic supervisor. The package is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Summary of the Training Sessions*

| Section                | Description                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Behavioral definitions | 1. The unemployed individual is unaware of the role of harmful mental imagery in impairing the ability to obtain employment.                                                                     |
|                        | 2. The unemployed individual does not know how mental imagery may impede employability.                                                                                                          |
|                        | 3. The unemployed individual does not know how to manage harmful mental imagery.                                                                                                                 |
|                        | 4. The unemployed individual is unaware of how to use positive mental imagery and of its potential role in career readiness.                                                                     |
| Session 1              | Objective: To familiarize participants with the psychological causes of unemployment and increase unemployment-related self-awareness.                                                           |
|                        | Content: Participants become familiar with the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, familial, and social dimensions of the psychological causes of unemployment.                                    |
|                        | Assignment: Completion of Worksheet 1, "Identifying the Psychological Causes of Unemployment."                                                                                                   |
| Session 2              | Objective: To increase awareness of the role of harmful mental imagery in unemployment and career readiness.                                                                                     |
|                        | Content: Participants become familiar with four types of harmful mental imagery and learn how these images contribute to unemployment or career readiness.                                       |
|                        | Assignment: Completion of Worksheet 2, "Identifying Harmful Mental Images."                                                                                                                      |
| Session 3              | Objective: To familiarize participants with the management of two types of harmful mental imagery.                                                                                               |
|                        | Content: Participants become familiar with trauma-reproducing imagery and imagery that triggers maladaptive emotions in relation to unemployment and learn how to manage these forms of imagery. |
|                        | Worksheet: Completion of Worksheet 3, containing exercises related to managing two types of harmful mental imagery.                                                                              |
| Session 4              | Objective: To familiarize participants with the management of paralyzing and disconnected harmful mental imagery.                                                                                |
|                        | Content: Participants become familiar with paralyzing and disconnected harmful imagery and its role in unemployment and career readiness.                                                        |
|                        | Worksheet: Completion of Worksheet 4, containing exercises related to managing paralyzing and disconnected harmful mental imagery.                                                               |
| Session 5              | Objective: To enhance career self-awareness regarding competencies and the mental images associated with them.                                                                                   |
|                        | Content: Participants become familiar with their career values, interests, skills, and related mental images and apply positive mental imagery to career self-awareness.                         |

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           | Worksheet: Completion of Worksheet 5, containing exercises related to career self-awareness and associated mental imagery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Session 6 | Objective: To familiarize participants with resource management through mental imagery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|           | Content: Participants become familiar with methods of managing time, daily routines, and personal organization through mental imagery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|           | Worksheet: Completion of Worksheet 6, involving the monitoring of mental imagery exercises related to resource management.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Session 7 | Objective: To increase awareness of the importance and role of continuous learning, mental health, and social capital through mental imagery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|           | Content: Participants become familiar with the role and importance of self-directed learning, critical thinking, and learning intelligence in continuous learning. They also learn about the importance of mental health through resilience, emotion regulation, and self-compassion, as well as communication skills, networking, and professional-profile management through mental imagery. |
|           | Assignment: Completion of Worksheet 7, containing exercises related to career development in the areas covered during the session.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Session 8 | Objective: To familiarize participants with career development in the areas of career adaptability, planning, and transforming awareness into action through mental imagery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|           | Content: Participants become familiar with the dimensions of adaptability, planning, and methods of transforming awareness into action through mental imagery.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|           | Assignment: Completion of Worksheet 8, containing exercises related to improving the skills learned throughout the program.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

As shown in Table 5, the positive mental imagery program designed specifically for unemployment comprises eight training sessions. To assess its content validity, detailed descriptions of all eight sessions were prepared, and eight university specialists in occupational psychology and career and organizational counseling were asked to evaluate the content and structure of the package across several dimensions. The content validity ratio was calculated and found to be .98, indicating that the package possessed satisfactory content validity.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to develop and establish the content validity of a mental imagery training package for the career development of unemployed youth. The findings showed that the psychological content of unemployment could be organized into three overarching domains: the psychological causes of unemployment, the foundational pillars of career development, and the principal components of career development among unemployed individuals. The psychological causes of unemployment included cognitive, emotional, behavioral, familial, and social factors. The foundational pillars of career development comprised access to infrastructural resources, personal organization and resource management, continuous learning, mental health, and social and relational capital. The career-development components included self-awareness, labor-market awareness, alignment with external realities, career adaptability, planning, and the transformation of awareness into action. The content analysis of the mental imagery literature also produced three major categories: psychopathology, the goals of positive mental imagery, and therapeutic strategies. These findings were integrated into an eight-session training package, and the obtained content

validity ratio of .98 indicated a high level of expert agreement regarding the relevance and adequacy of the package.

One of the principal findings was that unemployment should be understood as a multidimensional psychological and social phenomenon rather than merely as the absence of paid employment. The extracted cognitive causes included defectiveness and incompetence schemas, selective attention to failures, analysis paralysis, and distorted mental representations of the labor market. This finding is consistent with the psychology-of-working perspective, which emphasizes that unemployment affects identity, agency, dignity, belonging, and perceived social worth, in addition to financial security (Blustein, 2013; Kossen & McIlveen, 2018). The experience of unemployment can lead individuals to interpret external barriers as evidence of personal inadequacy, thereby weakening self-confidence and perceived employability. The question of personal worth may become particularly salient when repeated rejection is internalized as a global judgment about the self rather than as a situational outcome shaped by labor-market conditions (Pultz & Hansen, 2026). From this perspective, the cognitive causes identified in the present study may contribute to a self-reinforcing process in which negative beliefs reduce job-search activity, limited activity decreases opportunities, and continued unemployment further confirms the original beliefs.

The findings also highlighted the emotional dimensions of unemployment, including performance anxiety, depressive symptoms, lack of motivation, failure-related psychological trauma, self-distrust, and learned helplessness. These results align with evidence showing that unemployment unfolds along an emotional timeline involving anticipation, acute reaction, and subsequent adaptation or deterioration (Von Scheve et al., 2017).

Unemployment may also be associated with changes in personality-related functioning when exposure to rejection, uncertainty, and social withdrawal becomes prolonged (Boyce et al., 2015). The inclusion of emotional dysregulation in the package is therefore theoretically justified because intense negative affect can interfere with concentration, decision-making, social interaction, and persistence in career-related behavior. Recent intervention findings have shown that emotion-regulation programs can improve psychological functioning among unemployed adults, supporting the need to incorporate emotional-regulation strategies into career-development interventions (Ramos & Cunha, 2026). In the developed package, emotion regulation was not treated as separate from career readiness; rather, it was conceptualized as a necessary condition for effective action.

Behavioral causes of unemployment were another major category identified in the analysis. These causes included avoidance of learning, networking, checking employment opportunities, and following up on applications, as well as postponement of essential tasks and scattered job-search efforts. Such behaviors may emerge when career-related situations evoke anxiety, shame, or expected failure. The significance of these findings lies in the fact that employability depends not only on knowledge and intention but also on repeated behavioral engagement. Career self-efficacy has been shown to influence individuals' willingness to explore options, make decisions, and sustain goal-directed behavior. Solution-focused career counseling, for example, has been associated with increased career decision-making self-efficacy by directing attention toward attainable goals, existing resources, and concrete steps (Rafiola et al., 2023). Similarly, social-cognitive career counseling has demonstrated positive effects on self-efficacy and vitality by helping individuals identify barriers and strengthen beliefs concerning their capacity to act (Khabaz Shirazi et al., 2021). The behavioral components of the present package were therefore designed to move participants from passive reflection toward structured rehearsal and practical career action.

The identification of family-related and social causes further demonstrated that unemployment cannot be adequately explained through individual variables alone. Excessive familial pressure, overprotection, absence of career role models, negative inherited beliefs about money or work, and parenting styles inconsistent with occupational autonomy may all affect career behavior. Social stigma, skills mismatch, weak professional networks, and

insufficient social capital may similarly restrict access to employment. This finding is compatible with the broader understanding of unemployment as an interaction between the individual and the social, economic, and institutional environment (Blustein, 2013; Pigou, 2013). Career-development interventions should therefore avoid presenting unemployment solely as a result of insufficient effort. Instead, they should help individuals distinguish between modifiable personal barriers and structural constraints while strengthening the resources available for responding to both.

A second major finding concerned the foundational pillars of career development. Self-knowledge, soft and technical skills, awareness of values and limitations, time and energy management, self-discipline, continuous learning, emotion regulation, resilience, self-compassion, communication, networking, and digital professional identity were all identified as essential resources. This result aligns with contemporary accounts of career readiness, which emphasize knowledge acquisition, information management, adaptability, digital competence, and continuous learning (Raut et al., 2024). Skill development is especially important in reducing the gap between individual competencies and labor-market requirements, and theoretical modeling has shown that improved skill development can contribute to the control and reduction of unemployment (Misra et al., 2022). The inclusion of digital identity and online professional presentation is also supported by the growing role of virtual environments in training, networking, recruitment, and career counseling (Zimmer & Matthews, 2022). The package therefore treats career readiness as a dynamic and multidimensional capacity rather than as a fixed trait.

The identification of self-awareness, labor-market awareness, adaptability, and planning as core dimensions of career development is consistent with career construction and life-design approaches. Career-development interventions are most effective when they enable individuals to clarify their vocational identities, recognize personal strengths, examine contextual opportunities, and transform aspirations into realistic action plans. Group life-design interventions have improved employability among disadvantaged young adults by helping them reinterpret past experiences and construct more coherent future narratives (Maree et al., 2019). Group career-construction interventions have similarly supported vocational identity and career agency among socially disadvantaged youth (Cadaret & Hartung, 2020). Furthermore, life-design programs have been shown to improve vocational identity,

career adaptability, and career decision-making self-efficacy (Cardoso et al., 2022). The present package is aligned with these approaches because it combines reflective self-exploration with behavioral planning and future-oriented imagery.

The findings concerning career interventions with unemployed individuals also support the multidimensional structure of the developed package. An integrative review of career interventions for unemployed people showed that effective programs commonly include self-assessment, career exploration, job-search skills, psychological support, adaptability, and employability development (de Carvalho et al., 2024). Longitudinal findings have demonstrated that group career interventions may improve employability resources among unemployed adults over time (Carvalho et al., 2025). Process research has further shown that both face-to-face and online group interventions can create meaningful opportunities for reflection, peer support, and career action (de Carvalho et al., 2025). The present package is therefore compatible with both traditional and technology-mediated delivery. This is particularly relevant given meta-analytic evidence that online career counseling interventions can positively affect career-related psychological outcomes when they are structured and theoretically coherent (Yigit et al., 2026).

The content analysis of mental imagery produced a distinct set of findings related to psychopathology. Four forms of harmful imagery were identified: trauma-reproducing images, images that activate maladaptive emotions and negative core beliefs, paralyzing images, and disconnected images. These categories are consistent with the literature describing mental imagery as a perceptual-like process capable of activating memory, emotion, physiological responses, and behavioral expectations (Nanay, 2023). Distressing imagery is particularly influential because it may be experienced with greater emotional immediacy than verbal thought. Negative images can maintain anxiety, depression, shame, and avoidance, especially when they involve vivid simulations of rejection or failure (Holmes & Mathews, 2010). In the context of unemployment, mentally replaying unsuccessful interviews or imagining humiliation may strengthen threat expectations, whereas fantasizing about ideal employment without realistic effort may create disconnected representations that do not support purposeful action.

The goals of positive mental imagery identified in this study included modification of the mental model, physiological regulation, and functional improvement.

Mental-model modification involves changing schemas, redirecting attention from threat toward opportunity, and reducing the emotional intensity of painful memories. The empirical literature supports the emotional and behavioral effects of positive imagery. Generating positive images can improve mood and increase behavior consistent with positive expectations (Pictet et al., 2011). Positive imagery has also shown beneficial effects among individuals experiencing dysphoria, indicating that adaptive imagery may remain effective even when mood is initially negative (Grol et al., 2017). Positive psychology interventions that use imagery have also been associated with improved well-being, particularly when participants possess or develop the ability to generate vivid and meaningful images (Odou & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). Similarly, the use of positive psychology and imagery techniques has been linked with improved mental health in injured athletes, supporting the broader applicability of imagery to contexts involving disrupted confidence and recovery (Mahini & Aghi Aghdasi, 2025).

The therapeutic strategies extracted from the content analysis included cognitive restructuring, physiological-emotional regulation, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and experiential-perceptual strategies. These strategies provide a coherent framework for moving from maladaptive imagery toward adaptive occupational functioning. Imagery rescripting can alter the meaning of distressing experiences, attentional redirection can reduce threat-focused processing, and safe-place imagery can decrease excessive arousal. Imagery-based cognitive interventions have been used to reduce emotional dysregulation and mood instability by modifying recurrent emotional images and strengthening alternative representations (Paulet & Weiner, 2025). In the present package, these methods were adapted to employment-related situations such as interviews, networking, skill acquisition, and coping with rejection. Step-by-step mental rehearsal was also included because imagery can help individuals simulate performance, anticipate obstacles, and strengthen behavioral preparedness.

The structure of the eight-session package reflects the integration of career-development and mental-imagery findings. The first sessions increase awareness of the psychological causes of unemployment and introduce the role of harmful imagery. The following sessions focus on identifying and managing trauma-related, emotionally activating, paralyzing, and disconnected imagery. The later sessions apply positive mental imagery to career self-

awareness, resource management, continuous learning, mental health, social capital, adaptability, planning, and action. This progression is consistent with intervention research showing that career counseling can improve future orientation, career optimism, motivation, engagement, resilience, and hope (Abdollahi et al., 2024; Askari et al., 2025; Maisarah & Chen, 2025; Malekian & Abedi, 2024; Rouhafza & Aghili, 2026). It also reflects the value of proactive career approaches that encourage individuals to actively reshape their goals and engagement with occupational tasks (Mousavi Dastjerdi et al., 2026).

The high content validity ratio obtained in the present study indicates that the experts considered the objectives, techniques, structure, and time allocation of the package highly relevant. This result supports the conceptual coherence of integrating mental imagery with career-development training. The systematic use of conventional content analysis helped ensure that the intervention components emerged from recurring concepts in the literature rather than from arbitrary selection (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In addition, the use of expert review, iterative coding, and multiple evaluators strengthened the credibility and dependability of the development process (Noble & Smith, 2015). Nevertheless, high content validity should be interpreted as evidence of theoretical and professional appropriateness rather than as proof of clinical or practical effectiveness. The next stage must therefore involve empirical evaluation of the package with unemployed youth.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study developed and established the preliminary content validity of an eight-session mental imagery training package for the career development of unemployed youth. The findings showed that unemployment-related career development is shaped by interconnected cognitive, emotional, behavioral, familial, and social factors and depends on foundational resources such as self-awareness, mental health, continuous learning, personal organization, labor-market awareness, adaptability, and social capital. The analysis also identified trauma-reproducing, emotionally activating, paralyzing, and disconnected mental images as potentially important barriers to adaptive career behavior. Accordingly, the package integrated cognitive restructuring, physiological-emotional regulation, cognitive-behavioral rehearsal, and experiential-perceptual strategies to modify maladaptive imagery and

strengthen employability-related capacities. The high content validity ratio indicated strong expert agreement regarding the relevance and coherence of the package; however, this result demonstrates content adequacy rather than intervention effectiveness. Therefore, the package provides a theoretically grounded framework suitable for subsequent feasibility studies and controlled empirical evaluation among unemployed youth.

One limitation of this study was its reliance primarily on published texts and expert judgment. Although the selected literature provided a broad conceptual foundation, the analysis may not have captured all culturally specific experiences of unemployed youth. The findings may also have been influenced by the researchers' interpretations during coding and categorization. In addition, the content validity ratio reflects expert agreement but does not demonstrate that the package improves employability, career adaptability, self-efficacy, mental health, or actual employment outcomes. The package was designed as an eight-session intervention, but the optimal duration, intensity, delivery format, and follow-up period remain undetermined.

Future research should evaluate the package through pilot studies and randomized or quasi-experimental designs. Researchers should examine its effects on career decision-making self-efficacy, career adaptability, employment hope, job-search behavior, emotional regulation, psychological distress, and employability resources. Longitudinal follow-up is necessary to determine whether improvements persist and whether they translate into employment, training participation, or sustained career activity. Comparative studies should also assess face-to-face, online, group, and individual formats. Qualitative interviews with participants could clarify which imagery exercises are most acceptable, emotionally meaningful, and practically useful. Future studies should additionally examine whether factors such as age, gender, duration of unemployment, education, imagery ability, and previous occupational experience influence responsiveness to the package.

In practice, career counselors may use the package as a structured framework for addressing both the psychological and practical dimensions of unemployment. Before implementation, facilitators should assess participants' emotional readiness, career needs, imagery capacity, digital access, and possible trauma-related reactions. Exercises should be adapted to participants' cultural and occupational contexts and should remain linked to realistic job-search tasks rather than idealized fantasies. Counselors should

combine imagery exercises with labor-market information, networking activities, skills training, application preparation, and behavioral assignments. Referral pathways should also be available for participants experiencing severe depression, anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, or other difficulties requiring specialized psychological treatment.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

### References

- Abdollahi, S., Choubforoushadeh, A., Arianpour, H., & Sahraian, K. (2024). The Effectiveness of Cochran Career Narrative Therapy on Psychological Distress and Career Hope among Secondary-School Students. *Career and Organizational Counseling*, 16(3), 95-118. <https://doi.org/10.48308/jcoc.2025.238970.1466>
- Askari, M., Naami, A., & Hashemi, S. E. (2025). The Effectiveness of Career Excellence Training on Work Motivation and Work Engagement. *Career and Organizational Counseling*, 17(4), 11-36.
- Blustein, D. L. (2013). The Psychology of Working: A New Perspective. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Working* (pp. 3). Oxford University Press.
- Boyce, C. J., Wood, A. M., Daly, M., & Sedikides, C. (2015). Personality Change Following Unemployment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(4), 991.
- Cadaret, M. C., & Hartung, P. J. (2020). Efficacy of a Group Career Construction Intervention with Urban Youth of Colour. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 49, 187-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2020.1782347>
- Cardoso, P., Duarte, M. E., Pacheco, L., & Janeiro, I. N. (2022). Life-Design Group-Based Intervention Fostering Vocational Identity, Career Adaptability, and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*, 17, 1453-1467. <https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v17iSI.1.6674>
- Carvalho, C. L. D., Marôco, J., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2025). Employability Resources of Unemployed Adults: Longitudinal Effects of a Group Career Intervention. *Frontiers in psychology*, 16, 1470611.
- de Carvalho, C. L., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2024). Integrative Review of Career Interventions with Unemployed People: Nature, Outcomes, and Recommendations. *Journal of employment counseling*, 61(1), 18-45.
- de Carvalho, C. L., Taveira, M. D. C., & Silva, A. D. (2025). Face-to-Face and Online Group Career Intervention for Unemployed Individuals: A Process Study. *Journal of employment counseling*, 62(2), 78-102.
- Grol, M., Vanlessen, N., & De Raedt, R. (2017). Feeling Happy When Feeling Down: The Effectiveness of Positive Mental Imagery in Dysphoria. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 57, 156-162.
- Holmes, E. A., & Mathews, A. (2010). Mental Imagery in Emotion and Emotional Disorders. *Clinical psychology review*, 30(3), 349-362.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- Khabaz Shirazi, A., Golparvar, M., & Yousefi, Z. (2021). Comparing the Effectiveness of Social-Cognitive Career Counseling and Acceptance and Commitment-Based Counseling on Vitality and Self-Efficacy among Female Students. *Career and Organizational Counseling*, 13(4), 71-92. <https://doi.org/10.48308/jcoc.2022.102056>
- Kossen, C., & McIlveen, P. (2018). Unemployment from the Perspective of the Psychology of Working. *Journal of Career Development*, 45(5), 474-488.
- Mahini, T. F., & Aghi Aghdasi, M. T. (2025). *Examining the Impact of Positive Psychology and Mental Imagery Techniques on the Mental Health of Injured Athletes*.
- Maisarah, S., & Chen, M. L. (2025). Evaluating the Effectiveness of Positive Career Counseling on Career Decision-Making and Future Orientation. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 6(2), 146-154.
- Malekian, M., & Abedi, M. (2024). The Effectiveness of a Meaning-Centered Career Intervention on Subjective Career Success and Career Resilience among Employees. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology Studies*, 11(2), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.22055/jiops.2024.47001.1408>
- Maree, J. G., Gerryts, E. W., Fletcher, L., & Olivier, J. (2019). Using Career Counselling with Group Life-Design Principles to Improve the Employability of Disadvantaged Young Adults. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 29(2), 110-120.
- Misra, A. K., Singh, A. K., & Singh, P. K. (2022). Modeling the Role of Skill Development to Control Unemployment. *Differential Equations and Dynamical Systems*, 30(2), 397-409.

- Mousavi Dastjerdi, M., Abedi, M., Samiei, F., & Nilforooshan, P. (2026). Comparing Job-Crafting-Based Career Counseling and Social-Cognitive Career Counseling on Teachers' Work Engagement. *Journal of Applied Psychological Research*, 17(1), 181-200. <https://doi.org/10.22059/japr.2026.355963.644633>
- Nanay, B. (2023). *Mental Imagery: Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience*. Oxford University Press.
- Noble, H., & Smith, J. (2015). Issues of Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research. *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 18(2), 34-35.
- Odou, N., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2013). The Efficacy of Positive Psychology Interventions to Increase Well-Being and the Role of Mental Imagery Ability. *Social Indicators Research*, 110(1), 111-129.
- Paulet, T., & Weiner, L. (2025). Imagery-Based Cognitive Therapy to Reduce Emotional Dysregulation and Mood Instability in Bipolar Disorder: A Case-Series Study. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 53(1), 1-16.
- Pictet, A., Coughtrey, A. E., Mathews, A., & Holmes, E. A. (2011). Fishing for Happiness: The Effects of Generating Positive Imagery on Mood and Behaviour. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 49(12), 885-891.
- Pigou, A. C. (2013). *Theory of Unemployment*. Routledge.
- Pultz, S., & Hansen, M. P. (2026). What Am I Worth? An Exploration of Unemployed People's Experiences. In *Handbook on Unemployment and Society* (pp. 81).
- Rafiola, R. H., Hulukati, W., Idris, I., & Hamidah, A. U. (2023). Increasing Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy through Solution-Focused Career Counseling. *Bisma: The Journal of Counseling*, 7(2), 223-229.
- Ramos, E., & Cunha, C. (2026). Emotion Regulation Intervention in Unemployed Adults: Results from a Controlled Pilot Study. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 18(1), e70106.
- Raut, S. K., Alon, I., Rana, S., & Kathuria, S. (2024). Knowledge Management and Career Readiness: A Review and Synthesis. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 28(7), 1821-1866.
- Rouhafza, O., & Aghili, S. M. (2026). Comparing the Effectiveness of Flourishing Training and Transactional Analysis on Career Optimism and University-to-Work Transition Readiness. *Social Psychology Research*, 16(61), 91-108. <https://doi.org/10.22034/spr.2026.525963.2140>
- Sahito, F. Z., Sahito, Z. H., Alishba, U., & Phulpoto, J. (2025). The Effectiveness of Career Guidance and Counseling Services in Secondary Schools. *Voyage Journal of Educational Studies*, 5(1), 15-31.
- Von Scheve, C., Esche, F., & Schupp, J. (2017). The Emotional Timeline of Unemployment: Anticipation, Reaction, and Adaptation. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 18(4), 1231-1254.
- Yiğit, B., Uygun, E. G., & Erus, S. M. (2026). Do Online Career Counseling Interventions Work? A Meta-Analysis of Career-Related Psychological Outcomes. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 10690727261433253.
- Zimmer, W. K., & Matthews, S. D. (2022). A Virtual Coaching Model of Professional Development to Increase Teachers' Digital Learning Competencies. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 109, 103544.