

Reducing Negative Career Thoughts in Adults

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Abstract

The efficacy of a community centered career decision making program based on cognitive information processing's career decision making model was assessed. Adult participants showed a significant decrease in their negative career thoughts when the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996a) was used as a pre-test and posttest measure. The CTI global score plus all three of its subscales (decision making confusion, commitment anxiety and external conflict) showed remarkable decline after the intervention. Reduction of all levels of negative career thinking had strong statistical significance. Implications of the study are that the career decision making intervention greatly reduced negative career thoughts which are strongly associated with career indecision.

Introduction

Florida State University (FSU), a leader in the field of vocational research, conducted a research study in 2000 that considered the impact of a career course on members of its student body. In particular researchers sought to clarify if the career course reduced negative career thoughts (Reed, Lenz, Reardon, & Leierer, 2000). This study found that negative career thoughts were significantly reduced as a result of the FSU career course. In conclusion to their study Reed et al. 2000 suggested that further research be conducted with non-profit career transition programs and with other curricular interventions.

Following in this vein researchers in the current study sought to clarify whether similar results could be found in a Canadian non-student, non-campus based research study utilizing a curriculum based upon the Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) model of career decision making.

The purpose of the present study was to learn more about how a community based career decision making (CDM) intervention affected the negative career thoughts of adults. In particular researchers sought to clarify if there were overall changes in the nature of negative career thoughts between the beginning and the end of the CDM program. The Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) global scale and each of the three subscales were used to measure the change in the negative career thoughts of study participants.

Method

Participants in the research study were invited to take part in a career decision making intervention through a community referral mechanism and voluntary action. Participants attended a community based, government funded initiative in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. In total, forty (n=40; 20 male & 20 female) unemployed individuals participated in the study. Ages ranged from 17 to 59, mean age was 34 years with a standard deviation of 11.3. Data were collected from three sets of clients over a period of three months.

Procedure

Each individual completed an informed consent for the study. Upon intake the participants completed a CTI. Each individual participated in a proprietary eight to sixteen day career decision making program. Upon completion of the career decision making intervention participants completed the CTI for a second time. Researchers used a quasi-experimental pre-test / post- test design with no control groups to measure the effect of the intervention on negative career thoughts. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, used to determine whether the eight data sets were normally distributed, showed that six of the eight data sets met the criteria. T-tests for repeated measures were performed on all of the data sets.

The Research Instrument

The Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) was used to measure the impact of the career decision making intervention. The CTI is based on cognitive information processing theory (Peterson et al., 1991; Sampson et al., 1996) in relation to career decision making.

The CTI yields a total score which is used as a global indicator of dysfunctional career decision making and three construct scale scores: Decision Making Confusion (DMC), Commitment Anxiety (CA), and External Conflict (EC). (Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Lenz, J. G., Reardon, R. C., & Saunders, D. E. 1996:27)

The DMC scale measures an inability to begin the decision-making process due to impairing emotions and/or a lack of knowledge about the process of decision making. (Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Lenz, J. G., Reardon, R. C., & Saunders, D. E. 1996:28)

The CA scale measures an inability to commit to a specific career choice. Similarly it measures the presence of generalized anxiety about the consequence of making a career decision. (Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Lenz, J. G., Reardon, R. C., & Saunders, D. E. 1996:28)

The EC scale represents a person's negative thinking with regard to balancing one's own perceptions against the perceptions of significant others related to making career choices. (Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Lenz, J. G., Reardon, R. C., & Saunders, D. E. 1996:29)

Research has demonstrated a connection between CTI scales and perfectionism (Osborn, 1998), anger expression (Strausberger, 1998), and depression (Saunders, Sampson, Peterson, & Reardon, 2000). The CTI has also strongly correlated to career decision-making problems such as career indecision (Osborn, 1998: Saunders 1997)

The Career Decision Making Intervention

The CIP model of career decision making is a recursive cycle that includes communication, analysis, synthesis, valuation and execution (Peterson et al. 1991). Clarifying or obtaining knowledge about self, occupations, decision making and meta-cognitions are central to this process.

The CDM intervention (utilizing the CIP model) examined in this study has been in existence since 1996. The course is comprised of integrated modular instruction, comprehensive lifework assessment, opportunity for career research, and individual vocational counselling.

Modular instruction included understanding assessment results, vocational family mapping, vision casting, career research methods, labour market information, decision making, and barrier analysis.

The assessment battery included the Wonderlic Personnel Test, Kiersey Temperament Sorter, Knowdell Values Card Sort, Strong's Interest and Confidence, the Canadian Occupational Interest Inventory, Microskills, Ability Explorer, General Aptitude Test Battery, Bar-On EQi, and the Choices battery (Work Preference Inventory, Career Area Interest Checklist, Work Importance Locator and the Transferable Skills Checklist). Each of these assessments had a psycho-educational component and application opportunity.

Occupational research opportunities were available to all study participants. A career library (government and private resources) was augmented with dedicated databases (Choices), on-line databases (Career Cruising and Bridges), internet search engines and selected career favorites. Resource access was supported by a facilitator.

One to one counselling was also provided for all participants in order to assist in the CDM process. Participants met with clinical counsellors in order to clarify assessment results, discuss occupational preferences and to research and coordinate resources aimed at solidifying the participant's career goal including next steps (resources & dates) through an individual action plan (IAP).

Research Findings

The research question that was investigated in this study was:

- Do career thoughts of adults, vis-a-vis, CTI global, decision making confusion, commitment anxiety, and external conflict change as a result of a non-profit community based career decision making program intervention?

CTI scales were evaluated during the study in order to establish whether career thoughts changed as a result of the career decision making intervention. (See Table 1)

Since the majority of data sets (six of eight) met normality criteria, T-tests for repeated measures were performed on all of the data sets, but it should be noted that two --pre-decision making confusion and the post-external conflict-- did not appear to be normal distributions.

Table 1

Scale	N	pre-test mean	post-test mean	std. dev.	t	sig.
Global Scale	40	60.6	39.8	17.3	7.56	<.000
Decision Making Confusion	40	15.9	9.2	6.1	6.94	<.000
Commitment Anxiety	40	16.1	10.2	6.1	6.11	<.000
External Conflict	40	5.2	4.2	2.3	2.79	<.004

CTI Global Scale

The CTI global scale measures a single global indicator of dysfunctional thinking in career decision making. A pre-test-post-test comparison resulted in a statistically significant difference ($t = 7.56$; $p < .000$).

Decision Making Confusion

The decision making confusion (DMC) scale measures an inability to begin the decision-making process due to impairing emotions and/or lack of knowledge

about the process of decision making. A significantly significant difference ($t = 6.94$; $p < .000$) was found between pre-test and post-test.

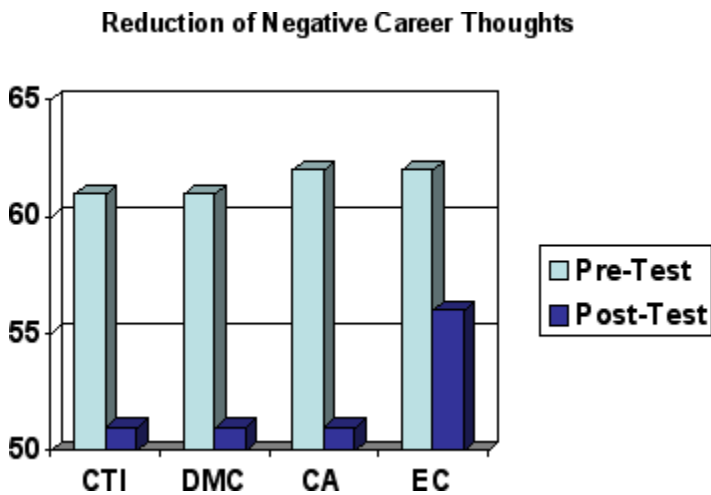
Commitment Anxiety

The commitment anxiety (CA) scale measures an inability to commit to a specific career choice. Similarly, it measures the presence of generalized anxiety about the consequence of making a career decision. A pre-test/post-test comparison of means indicated a significant decrease in commitment anxiety ($t = 6.11$; $p < .000$).

External Conflict

The external conflict (EC) scale measures a person's negative thinking with regard to balancing one's own perceptions against the perceptions of significant others related to making career choices. A statistically significant decrease ($t = 2.79$; $p < .004$) was found between pre-test and post-test.

Figure 1



Discussion

As with the Florida State University Study (Reed, Lenz, Reardon, & Leierer, 2000) the current research revealed a positive impact of a career decision making intervention on the reduction of negative career thoughts of participants. This study was unique in that it mirrored the Florida State study but based its research on an adult population in a community centered CDM program, factors not considered before in similar research.

The current findings are significant for several reasons. Participant negative career thoughts dramatically reduced as a result of the career decision making intervention. This suggests that participants taking such a course will be more successful in engaging the career decision making process. Participants with high levels of career decision making confusion may be ineffective in their career decision making as a result of disabling emotions or lack of knowledge of the process of decision making. Reducing their negative emotions or teaching decision making strategies through an intervention would enhance their chances of finding a rewarding career path or employment. Participants with high commitment anxiety may withdraw from active engagement in career search because of their generalized anxiety pertaining to decision making. Reduction of negative thinking in this domain will boost the confidence and action taking of the participant thereby enhancing their career or job search. In a similar fashion, reducing participants' negative thoughts pertaining to external conflict will assist them in making decisions that are internally valued by them than by significant others. Similar research (Taylor & Popma, 1990) has shown that decisions that are internally valued facilitate rather than impede the career decision making process. Reducing high levels of participant EC will assist the career decision making process.

Though the current study showed significant value in reducing the negative career thoughts, it is not without limitations. First, the current study utilized a small sample for its study. Though results were statistically significant to the $p < .000$ level it is held that a larger sample size could offer more representative confirmation of the existing study. Secondly, there is no way to know for sure what specific factors of the career decision making intervention caused the reduction of negative career thoughts. Thirdly, because of the limited time between pre and post testing (4 weeks), test effect might have influenced the study outcomes. Further research could address these issues. Finally, the inclusion of a control group would enhance the credibility of the current study.

Additional research using non-student and non-campus populations could shed light on the issues facing the many adults who are in career transition. Similarly, research measuring whether reduction in negative career thoughts enhanced the career decidedness of participants as well as career indecisiveness could shed light on emerging research trends within the career development field.

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