Negative Career Outlook and the Working Alliance in Career Counseling

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Abstract

The present study investigated three dimensions of the working alliance—Goal, Task, and Bond—and the reduction of negative career-related thoughts. A pre-test post-test design revealed a significant reduction in negative career thoughts after an initial career counseling interview provided to $N = 87$ college students. Regression analysis revealed that Task predicted negative career thoughts. The findings offer evidence of the effectiveness of career counseling and of the contribution of working alliance to counseling as a process and outcome variable.

Keywords: career counseling, working alliance, negative career thoughts, career counseling effectiveness

Negative Career Outlook and the Working Alliance in Career Counseling

The *working alliance* between client and counselor (Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) is essential to career counseling (Whiston, Li, Goodrich Mitts, & Wright, 2017). Working alliance is a multidimensional construct comprising a higher-order factor with three sub-factors: *goal, task*, and *bond* (Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989; Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989). Horvath and Greenberg (p. 224) encapsulate Bordin's conceptualization: Tasks are the substance of counseling, and client and counselor mutually accept responsibility for their implementation; goals are the mutually endorsed and valued outcomes of counseling; and, bonds are a complex of relational attachments, including trust, acceptance, and confidence.

The average strength of the relation between the working alliance and client outcomes is $r = .30$ (Whiston, Rossier, & Barón, 2015). Working alliance influences clients' satisfaction and outcomes, such as career exploration (Elad-Strenger & Littman-Ovadia, 2012), career decision making (Masdonati, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2009) and use of career information (Masdonati, Perdrix, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2014). Working alliance is a crucial process variable that may be enhanced during counseling, such that positive change enhances working alliance, which enhances positive change, and so on (Xu & Tracey, 2015). The effects of working alliance may differ among its sub-factors. Task and goal may moderate counseling effects on perceived lack of information; however, bond may not (Masdonati et al., 2014). Similarly, goal may be the stronger mediator that decreases overall career decision difficulties and lack of readiness to decide, along with task as a mediator of perceptions of inconsistent information; whereas, bond may have no mediational qualities (Masdonati et al., 2014). These findings reveal important differential effects of working alliance sub-factors. The present research extends this line of inquiry by exploring their relations with negative career-related thoughts.

Whiston et al. (2015) recommend that career counselors focus on the working alliance early in their interventions, citing evidence that the positive effect of working alliance on career exploration stabilizes after the first session (Elad-Strenger & Littman-Ovadia, 2012). Furthermore, Whiston et al. argued for more correlational studies of working alliance and outcomes, including brief interventions. The present research replies to those recommendations by investigating the effects of single-session counseling in context of working alliance.

Present Research

The primary focus of the present research was the association between clients' negative thoughts and working alliance. Lower self-esteem and career decision-making are associated with negative (i.e., pessimistic) beliefs (Creed, Patton, & Bartrum, 2002) and, similarly, decidedness and career decision-making efficacy are associated with negative career outlook (Rottinghaus, Buelow, Matyja, & Schneider, 2011). Beyond its direct effects, negative career thoughts (e.g., decisional confusion, commitment anxiety, conflict) mediates the relation between stress and career decidedness and dissatisfaction (Bullock-Yowell, Peterson, Reardon, Leierer, & Reed, 2011). Furthermore, Bullock-Yowell et al. (2011) argued that negative career thoughts at the beginning of career counseling may diminish positive cognitive processes in counseling (e.g., self-knowledge, decidedness), which may reflect the association between negative career outlook and avoidant coping (Rottinghaus et al., 2011). It is likely that a client's initial negative thoughts would have some influence on working alliance. Therefore, we aimed to determine whether negative career thoughts are associated with a specific dimension of working alliance (i.e., goal, task, bond).

Method

Participants

The $N = 87$ participants in this study were college students attending a regional university who presented at the Career Service "Drop-in Center" seeking counseling for concerns about their career. Participants' degree programs were a mix of business, education, engineering, arts, law, health, humanities, and sciences. The majority of participants were female ($n = 56$, 64.4%) and one participant chose not to identify gender. Ages ranged from 17 to 60 years ($M_{age} = 30.78$, $SD = 10.81$) and this relatively higher average age reflects this university's focus on providing access to non-traditional students (e.g., rural, mature, low SES). The sample included White ($n = 65$, 74.7%), Pacific Islander ($n = 5$, 5.7 %), Vietnamese ($n = 3$, 3.4%), Indian ($n = 3$, 3.4%), Sri Lankan ($n = 3$, 3.4%), Sudanese ($n = 3$, 3.4%), Croatian ($n = 2$, 2.3%), Indigenous ($n = 2$, 2.3 %), and Chinese ($n = 1$, 1.1%) participants. The majority were employed in contract/precarious jobs ($n = 57$, 65.5%) and full-time jobs ($n = 10$, 8.7%), and the remainder was unemployed ($n = 20$, 22.9%). A master's-degree-qualified career development practitioner provided the counseling to participants and a senior doctoral-qualified practitioner supervised the counselor for the purposes of the research.

Procedure

Participants were provided the standard Drop-in Center service that involves a 55-minute interview to explore the presenting problem, its history, and other factors that may relate to its manifestation for the student (e.g., academics, employment, and mental health concerns). The counseling followed a standardized protocol whereby clients responded to a semi-structured interview that addresses multiple career influences from a systems theory perspective (McIlveen, 2015). Questions addressed levels of influences, ranging across distal societal-environmental

influences (e.g., Geographical: Where do you come from? Do you want to work in a rural/metropolitan area?), social influences (e.g., Popular Culture: Is there anything in current music/movies/etc. that affects your career thoughts?), interpersonal influences (e.g., Family of Origin: What work did your mother/father/siblings do? What role do they play in your career planning?), to intrapersonal (e.g., Self Concept: Do you like yourself at the moment? Who would you like to become? Describe yourself in 10 years-time?). The interview protocol is free of charge and made available by the author (McIlveen). Participants completed measures of negative career thoughts before and after the counseling session, followed by a measure of working alliance. The university's Human Research Ethics Committee approved the research.

Measures

      Negative career thoughts. The Negative Career Outlook (NCO) subscale from the Career Futures Inventory-Revised (Rottinghaus et al., 2011) measures "negative thoughts about career decisions and belief that one will not achieve favorable career outcomes" (p. 130). The measure was used by the Service as a brief measure of client outcome for routine evaluation purposes. A sample item from the 4-item scale is, "I doubt my career will turn out well in the future". The scale ratings range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). In the present study, pre-test and post-test internal reliability coefficient were $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = .82$, respectively, compared to $\alpha = .77$ in the original validation study.

      Working alliance. The 12-item short form of the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI-SR) (Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989) is a measure of three factors that may be present in the thereapeutic relationship between counselor and client: Goal, Task, and Bond. An example item for each of these factors is, respectively: "_____ and I are working towards mutually agreed upon goals"; "I am confident in _____'s ability to help me"; and, "_____ and I agree

about the things I will need to do in the session to help improve my situation". The scale ratings

range from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Internal reliability coefficients were: Goal, $\alpha = .64$; Task, $\alpha =$

.87; and Bond, $\alpha = .82$; which were lower than the coefficients in the original validation study to

$\alpha = .90$, $\alpha = .92$, $\alpha = .90$, respectively. The item "_____ and I have different ideas on what

my issues are" was retained despite its deflationary effect on internal reliability of the Goal scale.

Results

Data screening revealed normal distributions within the measures of NCO but mild

negative skew in WAI measures due to the frequencies of higher scores and affirmed by

Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, $D_{Bond}(84) = .191$, $D_{Task}(84) = .159$, $D_{Goal}(84) = .131$, p <.05.

Treatment of skew involved inspection of cases and removal of outliers. All Cook's distances

were < 1. Two cases had Mahalanobis distances < 15 and were deleted. Table 1 presents the

correlations among scales, their means, standard deviations, and coefficient alpha for internal

consistency. Participants' levels of NCO decreased significantly from $M_{pre} = 11.64$ (SD = 4.46)

to $M_{post} = 8.66$ ($SD = 3.40$), $t(82) = 7.36$, p < .05, $r = .57$. A two-step linear regression model

predicted with NCO$_{post}$ scores. NCO$_{pre}$ scores were entered at step-one, $R = .573$, $R^2 = .33$, $SE =$

2.77, $F = 39.59(1, 81)$, $p < .05$, followed by Bond, Task, and Goal entered at step-two, $R = .716$,

$R^2 = .512$, $SE = 2.41$, $\Delta R^2 = .18$, $F = 9.78(3, 78)$, $p < .05$, Durbin-Watson = 2.17. As revealed in

Table 2, only NCO$_{pre}$ and Task significantly predicted NCO$_{post}$ scores.

Discussion

Results of this study indicate that clients' scores for negative career-related thoughts

decreased markedly after their initial counseling. As expected, clients' negative thoughts

strongly predicted the same after counseling at a rate of 33% of the variance. With respect to the

research question, clients' scores on Task predicted an additional 18% of the variance. Bond and

Goal made no contributions, however. This result is suggestive of differential effects among the dimensions of working alliance and clients' negative thoughts, which is not only consistent with previous research that found diffeA rences in the dimensions' moderation and mediation effects (Masdonati et al., 2014), but also quite evidently discerns the salience of Task within the alliance and, moreover, highlights the importance of mutually setting tasks for counseling. The findings are compelling because of the application of pre-test post-test measurements to control for the effects of negative career thoughts prior to counseling. The present evidence adds negative career outlook to the list of variables already established as sensitive to the effects of working alliance in career counseling, such as vocational self-efficacy and career decision difficulties (Whiston et al., 2016).

Implications for Counseling

On the strength of the findings, we suggest that counselors focus on immediate tasks so as to resolve their clients' negative career thoughts within a limited window of opportunity (i.e., one session). Attaining a quick win early in counseling may feel like an emotional boost or relief that serves to enhance a client's engagement in subsequent counseling sessions. Furthermore, the demonstrable impact of a single session may appeal to counselors and service managers who are mindful of and responsible for allocation of limited resources.

The present findings are important in the context of the current study that involved some students from a non-traditional background with attendant risk factors for dropping-out (i.e., first in family to attend college, rural, low SES) and who had relatively less access to positive role models (cf. Bennett, 2008). Given that non-cognitive factors (e.g., positive expectancies) predict academic performance and persistence (Poropat, 2009), it is plausible to recommend resolving negative career beliefs held by students who may disengage from their studies.

Limitations and Future Research

The research used a pre-test post-test design with repeated measures of negative career thoughts. It was not possible to implement a design with a control group in the context of the current study (i.e., a group receiving no counseling) because the denial or delay of a counseling service (e.g., wait-list) would contravene ethical standards used in the service context of the study. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that merely arranging an appointment to see a counselor would produce that same magnitude of change in negative career thoughts as observed in the client who participated in the research.

We focused on first presentation for initial assessment and intervention plan, which is ostensibly focused on tasks needing immediate attention. That Bond and Goal do not predict reduced negative career thoughts may be an effect of the brevity of the intervention. Considered through the conceptual lens of the reciprocal model of working alliance (Xu & Tracey, 2015), we purport that the relations between negative career thoughts and goal and bond may strengthen if measures are taken in subsequent sessions. Additional research is required to test this supposition, particularly to test the potential reciprocal relations. Nonetheless, such research should take into account previous research demonstrating stablization of the effects of working alliance after the first session (Elad-Strenger & Littman-Ovadia, 2012). Given the time limitations on the busy counseling center in which the research took place, it was not practical to ask clients to complete additional pre- and post-test measures. If such stringent time impositions were not present, then researchers should consider using all, or more, sub-scales of the Career Futures Inventory-Revised and the short Working Alliance Inventory. In addition, if it were feasible to use both measures across several sessions, then it would be possible to test for potential reciprocal effects among their respective subscales.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study add to the body of evidence that attests to the effectiveness of career counselling. In particular, our findings affirm career counseling's utility for resolving negative career-related thoughts via a relatively brief intervention. Given the demonstrable potential of negative thoughts to contribute to students contemplating dropping-out of their studies, we conclude that students should be referred to career counseling interventions that can rapidly abate these negative thoughts. Further, we recommend that counselors attend to the task dimension of the working alliance as a priority early in counseling.

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Table 1

Summary of Scale Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Coefficient Alpha

	NCO$_{Pre}$	NCO$_{Post}$	Goal	Task	Bond	*M*	*SD*	α
NCO$_{Pre}$	-	.60**	-.21*	-.29**	-.20	11.64	4.66	.79
NCO$_{Post}$	.60**	-	-.44**	-.55**	-.32**	8.66	3.40	.82
Goal	-.21*	-.44**	-	.69**	.66**	24.53	3.20	.64
Task	-.29**	-.55**	.69**	-	.71**	25.11	2.67	.87
Bond	-.20	-.32**	.66**	.71**	-	24.62	3.37	.82

Note. NCO$_{Pre}$ = Negative Career Outlook pre-test score; NCO$_{Post}$ = Negative Career Outlook post-test score; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 2

Regression Model Predicting Negative Career Outlook Scores at Post-Test.

Model	*B*	*SE B*	β	*t*	*p*
Step 1 (Constant)	3.58	.86		4.19	.000
NCO$_{Pre}$	.432	.07	.57	6.29	.000
Step 2 (Constant)	18.39	2.97		6.19	.000
NCO$_{Pre}$	.35	.06	.47	5.67	.000
Bond	.16	.12	.150	1.32	.190
Task	-.52	.17	-.40	-3.01	.003
Goal	-.19	.16	-.16	-1.21	.232

Note. NCO$_{Pre}$ = Negative Career Outlook pre-test score