

Full Length Research Paper

Factors associated with satisfaction in career counseling

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This study examined factors associated with users' satisfaction in career counseling settings. It is hypothesized that both expectation management and the rapport established with the counselor will determine users' satisfaction of the process and its outcomes. Two hundred and forty-seven Israeli participants agreed to fill out a questionnaire assessing the career counseling process they went through, 3 - 10 months after its completion. Results suggest overall moderate levels of satisfaction of the whole process, while multiple step-wise regressions supported our hypotheses regarding the roles of expectations, expectation management and rapport (secure, open relationship) with the counselor in overall satisfaction. Structural equation modeling supported a moderating model, discussed in light of existing evidence and potential for future studies.

Key words: Career counseling, expectations, rapport, satisfaction, moderating model.

INTRODUCTION

Vocational and career counseling has quite a tradition within the domain of psychology, and it has been gathering momentum during the last few decades (Forgy and Black, 1954; Saka and Gati, 2007). Central in diverse fields ranging from early school guidance to adult rehabilitation, the discipline seems to have matured on both the theoretical and practice levels (Betz, 1992). One of the major fields of research in this domain is focused on its validity. Numerous studies have addressed issues of theoretical content and construct validity of measures and practices (Rounds et al., 1987; James and Gilliland, 2003), various counseling models' predictive validity (Krivasty and Magoon, 1976; Kosciulek, 2003) and the internal and external (system-related) factors influencing the process of career counseling or its outcomes (Hay et al., 1976; James and Gilliland, 2003).

Client satisfaction is an important measure in vocational and career counseling research for at least two reasons: The first being that counseling is a specific type of service provided to demanding clients. The second is that client satisfaction can be and is often used as a proxy of effectiveness or at least as a way to learn from the client (Nevo, 1990; Mau and Fernandes, 2001) and is one of career counseling's most obvious outcome measures (Kosciulek, 2003). Some studies offered insights into the structure of client satisfaction (Hay et al., 1976; Kosciulek, 2003), the associations between

counseling method and user satisfaction (Nevo, 1990; Rothrock, 2006) and satisfaction as an outcome of successful, effective counseling (Crites, 1981; Brown and Brooks, 1990). However, career counseling, more than most other types of psychological counseling, is often a short-term process, where the practitioner is often left blind to the actual outcomes of the intervention (Oliver and Spokane, 1988). The current literature attempts to address the issue and provide directions for solution, the issue remains elusive at best as meta-analyses from the last decade reveal a broad range of outcome measures used in this field with little agreement on what constitutes a valid acceptable set of outcomes for research and practice (Whiston and Sexton, 1998; Heppner and Heppner, 2003; Whiston et al., 2003; Sligar and Thomas, 2009).

This study aims at the 'blind spot' mentioned above, looking at client (or user) satisfaction of various aspects of career counseling as a function of two main factors: expectations (and expectation management) and process-variables pertaining to the nature of the counseling process as an interpersonal interaction.

Expectations and satisfaction

Expectations are psychological entities often abused in

the literature and very seldom well-defined. Here we will relate to the following working definition of client expectations in service oriented settings, based on Tomsett (1989): Expectations are sets of requirements relating to the timeliness, adequacy, the overall experience and added value of a given event or service. As such they set the anchor or point of reference against which the actual experience is judged. Numerous studies link individuals' expectations to psychological appraisal and chances and levels of satisfaction (Alter and Seta, 2005; Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006).

Another concept that may contribute to our understanding of how expectations and their management influence satisfaction is 'the psychological contract'. Psychological contracts are implicit sets of beliefs about the nature of a transaction, between two parties or more (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). What differentiates this contract from others is that the expectations of at least one of the sides involved are left implicit, never expressed. Such implied expectation may still determine certain aspects of interpersonal interactions, expectation levels, and appraisal. In the context of counseling it was contended that psychological contracts are always formed, by users and consultants alike but only at times are they effectively communicated (Nevo, 1987). Therefore, the explicit and implicit formation and negotiation of expectations before and during counseling may play a pivotal role in determining the outcomes of the process.

Career counseling as an interpersonal interaction

People may turn to career counseling with various needs and in an emotional state ranging from extreme crisis to mere curiosity (Bordin, 1955; Tinsley et al., 1993). The role of the counselor is in most cases one of diagnosis, analysis and the collaborative unfolding of personal alternative choices and ways of action. The process may often entail touching personal motives, needs, and goals, personal strengths as well as personal and social weaknesses, obstacles and hardships (James and Gilliland, 2003). It is no wonder then that the nature of the interpersonal interaction between counselor and user, is of major importance in determining the outcomes of such process. Although this point is well acknowledged in the fields of teaching, guidance and therapy (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006), there is not enough empirical research relating to the importance of the quality of interpersonal relationship formed between the counselor and the user. Based on the above it was contended that the nature and quality of the relationships with the counselor will be associated with clients' satisfaction.

Hence it was hypothesized that satisfaction of career counseling will be determined by two major factors: the level of expectations and the quality of the interaction with the counselor. We tested this hypothesis within a sample of clients of a large vocational psychology

Institute in Israel, three to ten months after they completed counseling.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Setting and study design

The study took place in Israel's largest institute of vocational psychology, providing psychological assessment, HR selection, placement, coaching and career counseling services to corporate and individuals. Data collection was conducted at the career counseling division, focusing on private users only. Six counselors specializing in career counseling, all with at least a Masters degree in psychology and 4 years experience in assessment and career counseling were included.

The counseling process typically begins with a personal meeting dedicated to introduction to the process, expectation management and goal setting, followed by a full day of psychological testing consisting of: A computer-based psychometric battery, vocational interest inventories, personality tests, a personal interview and a group simulation aimed at assessing social skills, communication styles, and leadership potential. Two to four consecutive meetings are then dedicated to exploring abilities, expectations, values, career needs and preferences typically resulting in an informed decision made by the user, toward a career choice and the steps required to follow it. The study followed a correlational design, collecting data at one time-point, approaching clients at least 3 months after the end of the process.

Sample

Two hundred and forty-seven participants agreed to take part in a phone interview, out of 681 potential participants: all are clients of the career counseling division of Israel's largest vocational psychology institute, in the year prior to the time of our study. Of the above 203 did not meet the inclusion criterion of a minimum of 3 months since the end of the counseling process. The rest declined or were not available on the phone. Ages ranged 17-42 (mean = 23.7; s.d. = 4.2), as most were high-school graduates after mandatory military service (in Israel). Fifty-seven percent were women, the rest were men.

Measures

A questionnaire was designed especially for the purpose of examining the clients' satisfaction in full collaboration with the chief psychologists of the career counseling department, as content matter experts. The form was revised twice to fit the needs of the department clients and its final version consisted of 18 items of which 15 were 'closed items', phrased as statements pertaining to satisfaction with the administrative, personal and professional aspects of the counseling process, each ranked on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Two additional items referred to whether clients would go through the process all over again if they knew what they know today and if they'd recommend it to a good friend - both answered by 'yes' or 'no'. Lastly each participant was asked to rate their overall experience on a scale ranging 1-10.

The questionnaire was tested in a pilot run which showed excellent face-validity and that items were phrased in a clear manner allowing for simple, direct answers when administered over the phone (See appendix A for an English translation of the final

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the questionnaire items.

Item	Mean (Range 1-5)	SD
Prompt response on the phone	4.55	0.67
Information provided by Call-Center	4.44	0.81
Responsiveness of the department secretariat	4.41	0.79
Flexible session scheduling	4.05	1.02
Physical conditions (Offices, PCs etc.)	4.12	0.94
Staff's behavior and service	4.47	0.81
Defining expectations of the process	3.70	1.25
Comfort and Rapport with the counselor	4.22	1.30
Level of professionalism	4.16	1.24
Process met expectations	3.29	1.39
IT systems	3.17	1.78
Overall counseling process	3.40	1.33
Process was designed to fit counselee	3.70	1.21
Implementing the conclusions of process	3.15	1.56
Would like to continue process (yes/ no)	Yes = 30%; No =70%	
Would do again (yes/ no)	Yes = 60%; No = 40%	
Recommend to a friend (yes/ no)	Yes = 70%; No = 30%	
Overall evaluation (1-10)	6.95	2.30

ANOVA for differences among means = $F=14.82$ (245); $p<.001$.

Table 2. Stepwise regression analysis using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable (table shows only the items included in the formula in descending order).

Item	Multiple R	Partial r of item with criterion
Defining expectations of the process	0.75	0.75
Defining expectations of the process	0.78	0.42
Process met expectations		0.31
Defining expectations of the process	0.80	0.25
Process met expectations		0.30
Comfort and Rapport with the counselor		0.26

All of the above are significant at the $p<0.01$ or better.

version of the questionnaire).

Procedure

Potential participants were approached by phone by trained phone-interviewers. Those who agreed to take the survey were questioned over the phone, the interview being strictly based on the questionnaire. Typically the interview took 7 - 12 min. After completing data collection, the results were achieved using SPSS 16.0 and AMOS 16.0.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the questionnaire items. A repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for the significance of the differences

between the items' means. It is interesting to note that the overall satisfaction regarding the process is moderate.

Upon closer examination of the data it seems like clients gave higher satisfaction scores to administrative, service-oriented aspects of the process than to the professional, and outcome related aspects of it. We also looked at the possible effect of gender on satisfaction and found none. Therefore from this point on we referred to the data in a uniform manner gender-wise.

Hypothesis testing

To test the role of expectations and rapport in determining overall satisfaction stepwise regression analysis was used. Table 2 depicts the results supporting the hypothesis. The two items pertaining to the role of

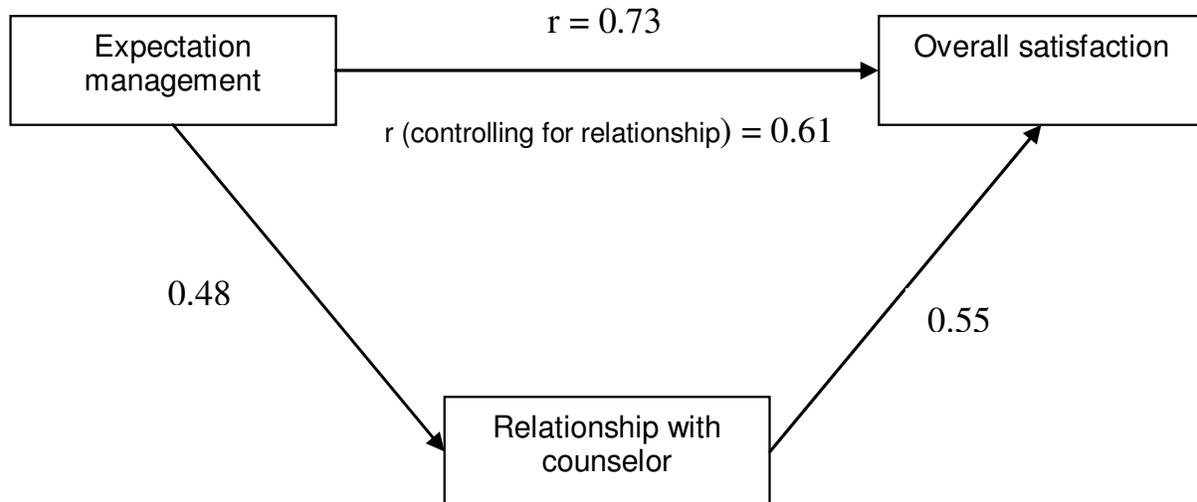


Figure 1. A moderate mediating effect of relationship with counselor on the association between expectations and satisfaction with career counseling. All the coefficients and coefficient changes are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

expectations in the process were the ones contributing the most to the explained variance in overall satisfaction, followed by the item referring to satisfaction with the interaction with the counselor. Additional items were excluded from the model.

Testing for mediating effects

It was hypothesized that expectations and the interaction with the counselor will account for satisfaction. We therefore wanted to examine the possibility of any of the above mediating the relationship between the other two variables. A closer look at the partial correlations in Table 2 shows a moderate change in correlation coefficients when comparing the three different models. To gain a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between the key variables Structural Equation Modeling was used to test for the changes in the associations between the expectation management and overall satisfaction when controlling for the relationship with the counselor. Figure 1 depicts the results of our analyses. The results suggest statistically significant mediating effect (Chi-Square = 14.90; $df = 2$; $p < 0.01$); however the effect is moderate to weak. Therefore, the associations between expectation management and satisfaction remain significant and moderate to high in magnitude even after controlling for the relationship between the counselor and the client.

DISCUSSION

Career counseling is sometimes viewed as a 'benign process' of which people come out with a smile. That

being said, some of the literature raises the issue of the underlying forces involved in the process often referring to identity related doubts, personal and socio-economic crisis and expectations (Nevo, 1987; Oliver and Spokane, 1988; Brown and Brooks, 1990). These issues are often left unattended to in both current research and practice (Mau and Fernandes, 2001). These also clarify the more complex and multi-layered nature of the career counseling as a process which outcomes are yet to be fully understood. Our study contributed to a better understanding of the dynamics of expectations and relationships with the counselor and their potential association with overall client (or user) satisfaction in career counseling. Our first somewhat surprise finding is the one suggesting only moderate levels of satisfaction.

The data was collected at one of the nation's leading institutes of vocational and career counseling, employing top professionals and enjoying excellent reputation in public opinion. Though far from being negative, the results are also far from brilliant in terms of satisfaction levels reported. One can only guess what the results might look like at institutes employing less experienced and not-as-well-trained staff. Why should that happen? The answer may lie with the very same notions we examined in this study: the expectations clients bring with them to the process are often non-realistic, such as "they'll tell me things about myself I never knew" or "they will tell me what to do with my life", "I will find my only true vocation" and so on (For additional description of this phenomenon see Nevo, 1987). Such expectations are bound to not be met in the process. How well the counselor identifies such expectation-traps and manages them is a subject yet to be explored in empirical research. Our results suggest that such management or the lack of it are the main factor accounting for overall client

satisfaction, even after controlling for the moderate mediating effect of the relationship with the counselor.

Another issue of which we know only little from empirical evidence is how open and receptive are users to this kind of expectation management. It seems like there is a 'catch 22' at the very basis of career counseling: while users are often confused about the potential paths they should pursue in their training and work efforts, they may come to counseling with the expectation of 'getting help' or 'being told' something significant about their choices. At the same time, the core of the counseling process throws the responsibility for the decision making back at the users - How open are they to such dynamics? How malleable are their expectations of 'getting something' rather than 'assuming responsibility for my choices based on systematic feedback and information'? To such challenge? Future research may wish to address such questions in order to better understand career counseling process factors.

Our study suffered a few limitations that need accounting for: Our sample, though large enough to provide statistical power for our analyses may not be representative enough for two reasons: the relatively high percentage of clients refusing to participate or being unavailable and the fact that the study was conducted on mainly young, urban, participants from Israel. However, in comparing the results with the few available elsewhere, they echo trends found elsewhere (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006; Kosciulek, 2003; Mau and Fernandes, 2001). Another limitation is the relatively short and 'impersonal' feedback questionnaire, administered over the phone. This operationalization may raise the risk of losing depth and more personal information in data collection. The relatively large size of the sampling frame and the fact that the Israeli population (much like the American and European) is well familiar with phone surveys made the decision the practical choice for this study. Last but not least, though a fact that this study did refer to processes occurring in a well documented time-sequence, it was still a correlational study in design and therefore the author was wary of discussing the results in terms of cause and effect throughout this manuscript. Longitudinal studies or comparative designs may help us reach more accurate conclusions in the future.

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