



The effect of client attachment style and counselor functioning on career exploration [☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 January 2008

Available online 14 September 2008

Keywords:

Career counseling
Career exploration
Attachment styles
Secure base

ABSTRACT

This longitudinal research investigated the interactive effect of social attachment style and perceived-counselor behavior on exploratory behavior exhibited by clients during and after career counseling. Results from 96 clients in career counseling indicated that social confidence and comfort, and the perception that the counselor had created social comfort and personal security, enhanced the range and effectiveness of career exploration by the client. The counselor's functioning as a "secure base" moderated the association between clients' avoidance and anxiety attachment style and their career exploration. Specifically, when the clients who were high in social avoidance or in social anxiety perceived-counselors as providing an atmosphere in which they feel secure, they engaged in career exploration far more than similar clients who did not perceive their counselor as a secure base.

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1. Introduction

The concept of career exploration is central to many vocational theories. Developmental theories assume that the people engage in self and environmental exploration in order to progress in career development (Blustein, 1992). Holland (1997) proposed a person-environment fit model in which people search for congruence between their personal traits and available occupational demands and rewards to achieve personal satisfaction and occupational success. Such congruence is achieved when individuals correctly identify their own traits and the characteristics of career options they are considering (Holland, 1997). Super (1990) also claimed that exploration is necessary to avoid later problems such as indecision impulsive decisions. Research has shown that careful career exploration is associated with achieving congruence between one's personality and the work environment (Grotvant, Cooper, & Kramer, 1986), realistic work expectations (Stumpf & Hartman, 1984), the number of interviews and job offers received (Stumpf, Austin, & Hartman, 1984), and recruiters' perceptions of applicants' interview effectiveness (Stumpf & Hartman, 1984). Creating a counseling environment that facilitates career exploration is a major objective, if not the major purpose of career interventions (Betz, 1999; Blustein, 1992).

Individuals vary in the degree to which they engage in career exploration (Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983). People who do engage in career exploration have been found to be high in intrinsic motivational orientation (Blustein, 1988), planfulness (Kracke & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2001), openness and career self-efficacy (Nauta, 2007), and internal locus of control (Noe & Steffy, 1987). These intrapersonal variables account for why some clients in vocational counseling engage in more career exploration than others, but do not take into account the interplay between client resources and the counseling relationship that is presumably designed to facilitate career exploration.

[☆] The study reported here was part of a doctoral dissertation by Hadassah Littman-Ovadia, submitted to Bar-Ilan University, under supervision of Prof. Mario Mikulincer. The author would like to thank Reuma Gadassi, Itamar Gati, and Noach Milgram for helpful comments on a previous version of the paper.

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1.1. An attachment perspective on counselee-counselor relations

Counseling relations can be conceptualized in terms of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982/1969, 1973, 1980, 1990). Originally, the concept of attachment was used to conceptualize child-parent relationships (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In such relationships the child occupies the role of needy, dependent relationship partner and parents occupy the role Bowlby (1982/1969) called “stronger and wiser” caregiver or attachment figure. Bowlby (1988) claimed, however, that attachment theory and the concept of attachment are relevant to social-cognitive processes and social-relational behavior across the life span. Following Bowlby’s (1982/1969) lead, other scholars (e.g., Ainsworth, 1991; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994) argued that attachment theory can be applied to any adult relationship that fulfills three criteria: (a) *proximity maintenance* (because individuals prefer to be near an attachment figure, especially in times of stress or need); (b) provision of a *safe haven* (an attachment figure often relieves an attached individual’s distress and provides comfort, encouragement, and support); and (c) provision of a *secure base* (an attachment figure increases an attached individual’s sense of security, which in turn sustains exploration, risk taking, and self-development).

In counseling relations, the counselor may occupy the role of a “stronger and wiser” caregiver or a security-promoting attachment figure. Effective counselors are sensitive and responsive to their clients needs; provide guidance, and emotional and instrumental resources; support counselees’ creativity, initiative, and autonomy; enhance clients self-worth and self-efficacy; support clients’ desire to take on new challenges and acquire new skills; affirm their ability to deal with challenges; and encourage their personal growth.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) conceptualized a two-dimensional model for understanding the attachment system: self-perception and others-perception. Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) linked the self-perception dimension to anxious attachment, and the perception of others to avoidant attachment. The former dimension manifests fear of abandonment and the latter the tendency to discomfort with closeness and dependency. Low levels of anxiety and avoidance reflect personal security and social confidence, whereas high levels reflect attachment insecurity (Brennan et al., 1998). According to Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007: “Attachment security provides a foundation for increased exploration which in turn facilitates growth toward autonomy and maturity.” (p. 73).

Empirical data support the relationship between secure attachment with parents and exploratory behavior in infancy and childhood (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth, 1991) and in adolescence (Ketterson & Blustein, 1997). The attachment research has expanded to current, short-term and not intimate adult relationships. For example, Lopez (1997) found a positive relation between the security in the relationship with the lecturer and student’s academic motivation, sense of social integration and personal involvement within college community life. Despite this field extension, attachment security has not been investigated with reference to the career counseling process. Pistole (1999) describes the effective counseling process as an attachment arena where the client experiences a secure attachment with the counselor and the latter provides caregiving direction and guidance, thereby creating an atmosphere that encourages career exploration by the client during and after the counseling process.

1.2. The present study

The present study examined the interactive impact of personality and environmental factors on the exploratory behavior of counselees during and after career counseling. There are some benefits for employing a natural rather than a laboratory or a reality-simulated study when investigating the factors that contribute to productive career exploration: (a) authentic client motivation to solve one’s career or work choice; (b) greater external validity and broader generalization of conclusions; and (c) identification of counselor behaviors that are essential for effective counseling. By identifying personal and environmental characteristics of clients who are unlikely to engage in exploration, career counselors may learn how to promote exploratory behavior.

In this study, client avoidance and anxiety attachment dimensions, counselor perceived functioning and the interaction between them were assessed as factors that predict career exploration behaviors during career counseling process. Based on the theoretical predictions discussed earlier, several hypotheses were tested (1) Attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety in clients associates negatively with their career exploratory behavior; (2) Counselor-perceived functioning as a caregiver providing a sense of secure base associates positively with career exploration; (3) Counselor-perceived functioning as a secure base moderates the relationship between client attachment (anxiety and avoidance) dimensions and client career exploration.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 96 clients from private and public career counseling centers. Prior to the first counseling session, clients were asked to take part in the research. The clients were 41 women (42.7%) and 55 men (57.3%). The age range was from 19 to 57 ($M = 45.0$) and the education range was from nine to 20 years ($M = 13.7$). Few (10.2%) had previous experience with career counseling. The majority (65.0%) were young adults about to make initial career decisions, or older

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