Influences of Career Counseling on College Students’ Perceptions of Career Barriers

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“Events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 446)

Current literature is dominated by models that categorize barrier types. For example:

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<th>Attitudinal</th>
<th>Social / Interpersonal</th>
<th>Interactional</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudes, Interests, Motivations, Personality traits, Skills, Values</td>
<td>Dual career family demands, Ethnic stereotypes, Family financial status, Gender role stereotypes, Multiple role conflict, Relocation requirements</td>
<td>Age, Education, Knowledge of work environments, Previous work experience, Race, Sex</td>
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(Swanson & Woitke, 1997)
Categorization models

- call attention to the variety of stumbling blocks that students encounter

- direct attention to the problems individuals encounter without providing insights into how to address the origins and impact of those problems

- can result in the unintended (but actual) side effect of reinforcing stereotypes, because they often are used to explore group differences (Chartrand & Rose, 1996)
To examine the influence that individual career counseling has on first-year college students’ perceptions of academic and career barriers.

Research Questions:

1. Do students who participate in individual career counseling experience a greater change in the magnitude of perceived career barriers than those expected due to maturation, as demonstrated by the control group?

2. What influences do students perceive individual career counseling to have on their perceptions of career barriers?
SCCT has been recognized as a promising approach for examining the process by which people make and pursue career choices (e.g., Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Chartrand & Rose, 1996;)

(Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994)
Career choices are made taking into account:

- **Opportunity structures** – job availability, economic conditions, costs associated with occupational entry
- **Perceived support systems** – financial, emotional, instrumental support
- **Perceived barriers** – discrimination, disapproval of significant others

*(Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994)*
Career interventions may be understood as one example of an environmental support that strives to assist, reinforce, and encourage students during the process of making academic and career choices (Buescher, Johnston, Lucas, & Hughey, 1989)
Research Design

- Time-extended – full academic year
- Before-and-after design – pretest, posttest, delayed posttest
- Quasi-experimental, with randomly assigned treatment and control groups

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Surveys All
Interviews (selected)
Intervention Treatment
Students enrolled in a mandatory transitions course for those who enter “Midwest University” (MU) with a status of an “undecided major”

- 847 students invited to participate
  (49% of all first-year, undecided students)
- 581 fit the study criteria (72% of invited)
- 305 students chose to participate in first survey
  (52% of those who fit the criteria)
- Randomly assigned to experimental groups
  (60 in treatment, 245 in control)

- 130 persisted to complete the full study
  (43% of participants; 33 treatment group, 97 control group)
Data Collection

- **Survey Instrument**
  - Full sample of 130 participants
    - Demographic form
    - Career Barriers Inventory-Revised (CBI-R; Swanson, 1995)

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**
  - Purposefully selected group of participants based on pretest survey responses
    - 15 treatment group, 9 control group
    (71 interviews conducted in total)
A three-part experience:

• an initial career counseling appointment
• a performance accomplishment activity to actively explore majors and/or careers
• a second career counseling appointment to reflect on progress and next steps

Individual appointments selected due to documented effectiveness as strategy for supporting the choice and pursuit of educational and career goals (Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Whiston et al., 1998)

Performance accomplishment activities based on connections to enhancing self-efficacy which, has been identified as an appropriate strategy for helping clients address perceived barriers within a career counseling context (Swanson & Woitke, 1997).
No main effect observed or experimental groups

Significant main effects for survey time, and an interaction effect for survey time and experimental groups
It seems that treatment group participants experienced decreases in perceived career barriers earlier in their first college year than did control group participants, and this may reasonably be attributed to the treatment.

Two-tailed test significance values presented. Significance indicated only for tests found to be significant in comparison to the Bonferroni corrected alpha (.05/3 = .017).
Identified cases where participants:

- identified and reflected upon academic or career barriers in their first academic semester;
- made progress reducing the identified barriers during their first college year; and
- clearly reflected upon what contributed to that progress.

- 10 of the 24 interview participants provided examples that fit these criteria

- Analyzed the data in two phases
When progress was made to decrease the influence of a perceived academic or career barrier, what contributed to that progress?

- **Remove the barrier(s) by choosing a different academic or career path** (2 participants)

- **Redefining how one thought about the barrier(s)** (4 participants)

- **Taking action to diminish the barrier(s)** (4 participants)
  - Performance accomplishment activities
  - Developing coping strategies
  - Making firm commitments
Adam, 18, White, male, pretest interview:

I feel like it’s a lot on me. I’ve got to figure out what I need to do. What concerns me the most is not being satisfied with the choice I make. I want to be confident that the career I choose is right for me and will make me happy throughout my life. I do not want to go through life being miserable and forcing myself to go to a job I hate everyday. … Knowing that I am not locked into anything I first choose. It will also be nice to know that whatever I choose to study is really what I want. I hope I can find my perfect major!

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I don’t want to feel like I’m underprepared or something. I feel like I have to still know what I’m talking about, but I don’t know what we’re going to talk about or what she’s going to ask me.
Adam, 18, White, male, posttest interview:

[I feel] a lot more confident ... all of those options that I was thinking about before would be fine for me if I do go into it. ... I’m not nervous or feeling pressured anymore.

[My career counselor] basically told me that I was in a real good position compared to a lot of people who still aren’t sure. And she basically gave me confidence, and I know what I’m doing now. I have my options. I know what I want to get into. I know what classes I need to take. So since I have that under my belt, she was like I’m going in a good direction. So that’s why I feel more comfortable now.

I already had a good idea of what I was gonna do, [the career counselor] didn’t have to do that much. I made it pretty easy on her... it was really easy because I had such good ideas.”
Denise, 18, Black/African American, female, pretest interview:

I’m **not willing to jump in yet**…. My only concern is just not liking the major and end up wanting to switch majors. I **really don’t want to switch majors**… I want to stick with that one major and go through it because I know when you start switching majors and you stay in school for five years and longer. I’m not doing that.

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**Extra time is extra money**, which is **more pressure on my mother**, in particular. My mom is single. If not her, then I have to take out loans and stuff like that. I’m **trying not to take out extra loans**.
Taking Action – Performance Accomplishment Activity

Denise, 18, Black/African American, female, posttest interview, reflecting on experience of developing her resume:

I think they just kind of help you stay on track… It was more of like okay, these are my experiences, and reminded me of what I’ve done and also let me know what I should do or if I want to join more programs or just do more within the program I’m in, that kind of thing. So I think it made a difference.

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[The career counselor] said he thinks I’m pretty much on track, so I think that was pretty good to hear because I was worrying. But he said as a freshman I’m doing pretty well . . . It felt good to hear that. Sometimes you just kind of doubt yourself, especially in a large university like this.
Kari, 18, Latina, female, pretest interview:

I really think I want to do a Kinesiology major. It’s just I’m a people person, I love working with people … People trust me, and I just create these relationships. Through physical therapy, you have to have those one-on-ones and just helping people … Kinesiology,, it has a lot of different areas I could go into like teaching, going to training, there’s just a lot of options there. But, **it’s going to be tough for me**. Class wise, if I don’t really understand the material or it’s impossible for me, because **science and math are not my strongest areas**, and I know those are very important in many majors. … **Even though I’m bad at science, I like biology** … I heard Kinesiology, they’re **really hard taking people** in because it’s so popular
Kari, 18, Latina, female, posttest interview:

Instead of just thinking about it, [the career counselor] had me do homework, I guess you could say.

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It’s still concerning, but I feel like there’s a lot of resources to help me . . . . [My career counselor] told me about [a program house for Latino/a students], how they help a lot with tutors and stuff like that, so I feel like there’s enough resources out there to help me out.
There is some evidence that the treatment group experienced decreases in perceived academic and career barriers earlier in their first college year than did control group participants.

- Decreases due to maturation are reflective of past research, while decreases related to the intervention are an extension of past research. (McWhirter, Rasheed, & Crothers, 2000)
Discussion

Participants perceived individual career counseling to play a role in changing their perceptions of barriers. Some important catalysts for this included:

- Performance accomplishment activities
- Connections with support resources
- Opportunities for reflection / discussion with a “trusted expert”

- Clear parallels to SCCT and related literature
  
  (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000; Makela, 2012; Swanson & Woitke, 1997)
Also a strong resemblance between the approaches to address perceived barriers and theoretical work on cognitive therapies

**Approaches**
- Remove the Barrier(s)
- Redefine the Barrier(s)
- Take Action to Diminish the Barrier(s)

**Theories**
- Cognitive therapy
  (Beck, 1976, Beck & Weishar, 1995; Meichenbaum, 1977)
- Reframing dysfunctional career thoughts
  (Cognitive Information Processing theory; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996)
This study provides evidence of the value of:

- research on environmental supports, “a missing environmental ingredient” that has “long been recognized in the career development literature, but [has] not often captured sustained research attention” (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000, p. 42)

- the use of mixed methods designs carried out over extended data collection periods

Future research could extend this work by examining:

- Interventions based on different theoretical foundations
- Multiple career intervention types
- Different types of career choices
- Diverse client populations
- Variety of service environments
First-year college students clearly perceive barriers to their academic and career decision making.

Participating in individual career counseling may help minimize the influence of perceived barriers when career counselors provide:

- information and support to refine how one thinks about a particular barrier, or
- guidance for students to take actions in the form of engaging performance accomplishment activities or developing coping strategies to overcome barriers.
Implications for Practice

- At a minimum, career professionals should be aware of the variety of barriers that students may encounter (e.g., McWhirter et al., 1998; Swanson & Woitke, 1997).

- Enhancing career decision-making self-efficacy may be an appropriate strategy for helping clients address perceived barriers (Swanson & Woitke, 1997).

- In some cases, a more direct approach to address barriers perceptions may be warranted.
  - Career professionals must recognize the limits of their own professional training and experience and the limits of the scope of services provide by the career services offices. When necessary, appropriate referrals should be made.
Limitations

- The scope of this study was delimited in many ways (e.g., single institution, single career intervention type, narrow student population, single career choice task).

- Participation in the study was voluntary and self-selected. Attrition did occur over the course of the study. (Although, steps were taken to address this. See Makela, 2011.)

- Exploration of barriers reduction in interview data analysis was limited by stringent inclusion criteria. However, due to calls for high-quality qualitative research in this area, the benefits were determined to outweigh the drawbacks.
Thank You!

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