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Case Study

Australian Council *for* Educational Research

Australian Journal of Career Development
2019, Vol. 28(1) 73–79
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DOI: 10.1177/1038416218779623
journals.sagepub.com/home/acd
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Building a solution-focused career counselling strategy for career indecision

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Abstract
The literature contains quite a few theoretical and case study articles with respect to the development and use of solution-focused brief therapy. However, very few of these studies focus on the effects of using solution-focused therapy principles and techniques in career counselling. This study is aimed to examine the effect of a five-session solution-focused brief career counselling on reducing a university student's career indecision. A university student who had a career indecision problem participated in the research. The career counselling process was assessed by using pre- to post-test result changes of the counselee. In order to measure the career indecision level of the counselee, Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire was used. The Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire was administrated before the beginning of the first session and after the termination session as a pre- and post-test. At the end of the five-session solution-focused brief career counselling process, the results demonstrated that the client's career decision-making difficulty level was reduced. The findings of the study were discussed based on the results of the research in the relevant literature.

Keywords
Solution-focused brief therapy, career counselling, career indecision, case study, constructivist approach

Introduction

Globalisation and the postmodernism movement, which began in the last century, affect the cultural, social, educational, and economic lives of all world societies. The transformations seen in the new economy have brought some changes in the professions, organisational structures, and business life. Along with globalisation and postmodernism, rapid developments in the field of information-communication and technology are also changing the way we work. New career areas are emerging based on flexibility and knowledge in working life, and these changes in the roles of careers, training periods, working hours, and so on lead individuals to face new everyday problems in their job, career, family life, career choice, career development, and career planning (Nota, Ginevra, & Soresi, 2012).

Some theorists in career counselling have developed new approaches and intervention methods that differ from the positivist scientific tradition of past career development theories (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; White & Epston, 1990), so as to help individuals cope with the problems they face in their work and family life. One family of new theories and approaches are the constructivist approaches to career counselling (Burwell & Chen, 2006; Miller, 2004), which were adopted towards the end of the last century and have become popular in recent years. The primary reason for this popularity is that the business world, which is changing and developing fast, is full of uncertainties and requires persistently developing new skills to adapt to this uncertainty, change, and development (Savickas, 1997).

These rapid changes and developments highlight the issue of career indecision, which is defined as the difficulty that individuals face when making a decision about their career (Chartrand, Rose, Elliott, Marmarosh, & Caldwell, 1993), and includes

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problems that occur before, during, and after the decision-making process (Gati, Asulin-Peretz, & Fisher, 2012). Around the world, university students and young people have experienced difficulties in making a career decision, and often seek professional help to cope with or resolve it (Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, Levin, & Gati, 2015; Tien, 2001). To deal with career indecision, contemporary career counsellors can fruitfully employ constructivist approaches in career counselling, as these are future oriented and sensitive to individual differences (Miller, 2004). On top of this, on account of its underlying philosophy and assumptions, solution-focused counselling (De Shazer, 1985) provides career counsellors with a collaborative, constructivist, expertise-based, and change-oriented strategy (McMahon, Adams, & Lim, 2002), which can help counsellors work in a holistic way by addressing the client's personal, emotional, family, social, and career concerns.

Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), with its basic philosophy and techniques, is an approach that focuses on solutions rather than problems, requires setting a goal quickly and taking quick steps to achieve this goal, emphasises the strengths of individuals rather than their personality traits, and makes use of these strengths as potential to cope with problems. In this respect, while SFBT was originally used in the field of family counselling (Corcoran & Pillai, 2007; McCollum & Trepper, 2001), it is being applied in mental health counselling (Zuroff & Blatt, 2006), school counselling (Kim & Franklin, 2009), and addiction counselling (De Shazer & Isebaert, 2004; Moyer, Finney, Swearingen, & Vergun, 2002). In addition, SBTF includes strategies that could be applied to individuals who have career problems due to being time sensitive and pragmatic (Burwell & Chen, 2006).

Studies have shown how SFBT techniques and strategies could be effectively incorporated into career counselling for individuals with various problems related to career indecision or other career problems (Brott, 2004; Burwell & Chen, 2006; McMahon et al., 2002; Miller, 2004). However, the number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies that test its efficacy is very limited. SFBT is thought to be a useful and practical approach to career counsellors at universities, because it focuses on strengths rather than obstacles, and helps students solve their career problems in a short period of time (Gingerich & Peterson, 2013). In this regard, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a five-session (each 45–50 minutes), solution-focused brief career counselling (SFBCC) intervention on reducing a university student's career indecision.

SFBT

SFBT is a post-modern therapy that focuses on individual strengths and aims to help individuals make changes in their lives as soon as possible (Ratner, George, & Iveson, 2012). With its idiosyncratic philosophy, methods, and techniques, SFBT can be considered as a form of a brief therapy (Davis & Osborn, 2000). SFBT differs from traditional approaches to therapy in many ways. Contrary to traditional approaches, SFBT emphasises the counsellee's strengths and previous success, rather than past failures or problems.

De Shazer (1985) listed the basic principles of the SFBT approach as follows:

- SFBT is based on producing solutions instead of problem-solving;
- the therapy process focuses on the desired future the client wants to achieve, rather than on former problems or present confusion;
- during the process, clients are encouraged to increase their functional behaviours, which they already have in their repertoires;
- exceptional circumstances in which the problem does not occur in the client's life are investigated;
- in the process, the client is assisted to find alternatives to change patterns of undesired behaviour, cognition, and interaction.

According to this approach, change comes from two basic principles. The first is to encourage people to define their desired future, and the second is to talk about examples of accomplishments that they have experienced in the past or in the present (Miller, 1997).

Consequently, SFBT is a goal-directed, future-oriented approach to brief therapy, which uses questions designed to identify the exceptional times when the problem does not occur in the client's life. SFBT focuses on solutions consistent with an explanation of what life will be like when the problem comes to an end and utilises scales that are used both to determine the client's current level of progress towards a solution and goals needed to be achieved for further progress (Trepper, Dolan, McCollum, & Nelson, 2006). In addition, SFBT uses 'miracle' questions (i.e. questions that support clients to describe their life without problems and help them overcome their sense of hopelessness) that help the client set more manageable goals (Miller, 2017). In this study, all these principles of SFBT have been taken into consideration.

Case introduction

The counsellee is a male university student, aged 19. He is a second-year, undergraduate student in the guidance and counselling department of a large city university, located in the capital city of Turkey. The counsellee is single and residing in a government-run dormitory. He is the youngest child of his family, with two sisters. He described himself as being depressive,

disputatious, blocked, reactive, and melancholic. Not having had any serious illness since birth, the counsellee mentions having undergone psychological counselling for the same career problem before, but that the counselling process did not help him deal with the problem. Although he wanted to be a military officer since his childhood, all of his initiatives to become one have been unsuccessful for various reasons. The counsellee stated that he does not like his study major and that he does not want to work in this area in the future. He is not motivated for his courses, enjoys neither school nor out-of-school time, and his courses are distressing since his mind is busy worrying about what to do for his future career. The counsellee was considering leaving the university and taking the exams for the National Defense University, but he is afraid of failing the exam or having problems during any phase of the preparation or application process. He thinks that he will not be able to graduate on time if he cannot pass the exam and had settled on continuing his present education. He also mentioned getting financial support from his parents, and he is anxious about being a burden to them if he leaves the university and prepares for the exams again. Owing to these considerations, fears, and anxiety, he is too uncertain about what he should do. This uncertainty causes him not to enjoy his life or anything he does.

Intervention

In order to help the counsellee cope with his career indecision, SFBCC was conducted for five sessions. The counsellor followed all the principles and rules of SFBT and career construction in the career counselling process and applied these techniques. The counsellor adhered to the ethical standards of career counselling. In this process, the counsellor attempted to enhance the counsellee's awareness of attitudes and behaviours that could impede his career decision making. The techniques, questions, and evaluations made during the intervention are summarised below.

First session: Pre-test/introduction/problem clarification/goal setting: Once the pre-test was administered, the structure of the process was established, and the counsellee was informed about how the process was going to unfold. With the intention of helping the counsellee directly set a goal, the question, 'What is going to change in your life after the counselling process ends?' was asked. The counsellee replied, 'I will have got rid of my career indecision, and will be trying to carry out the decision I have made.' The reason why the counsellee sought counselling was that he was in a course, but studying reluctantly. What he actually wanted was to be a military personnel, but he was confused about how to achieve this, and what his options were. He stated feeling unmotivated and reluctant towards everything. The miracle question was asked to the counsellee in the form of,

> Last night when you were asleep, a miracle happened, and everything in your life began to go as you wanted. You do not realize this because you have just woken up. How would you first know the miracle happened when you woke up in the morning?

He replied, 'I would be a military officer or be studying to become a military officer'. On a rating scale ranging from 0 to 10 (10 meaning he has a definite decision about his career), he evaluated his position as '2' in the first session, and stated that identifying options for his career, getting information about these options could be achieved, and making a decision, could raise his rating to a '9'. In this respect, the counsellee set the goal to be collecting information about his preferred profession, evaluating ways for transition, choosing the best possible way for him, and striving for that option. Homework was assigned to the counsellee to interview someone who was currently serving as a military officer, with the aim of obtaining information about the profession, and to determine what options were available for him to switch directions.

Middle sessions: Providing information/focusing on what works/keeping changes going. In the second, third, and fourth sessions, the focus was on the counsellee obtaining up-to-date information on the profession. Through these sessions, it was ensured that he interviewed two military officers who were currently working in the profession. As a result of these interviews, he got information about the profession, the advantages and disadvantages of it, and the ways by which he could move into it. In this phase, alternative areas that were related to his interests were also a focus. These were based on the assumption that he graduated from his current course, but failed to get into the military. In this way, the counsellee first widened his options based on relevant information it and then chose the most appropriate way to make a decision and reach his goal.

An abbreviation of how this decision was expressed is as follows:

> When I review the whole counselling process, with all of the information I obtained from these interviews, the most reasonable decision for me is to graduate from my program, and then complete the compulsory military service, and observe the environment there. If I decide that the environment and the profession really suit me, then I will apply to join the army. Either way, I will have a profession when my military service is over. When I first came here, I did not have any faith in anything, I had no motivation to make a decision or take a step. I thought it was going to end badly for me. However, now that I have made a decision, I feel relaxed and motivated. My relationships

> with my friends have improved. I do not pretend to be happy anymore; I really feel happy. I think about how I can use what I have learned at the university in a military profession, and this gives me an interest in my courses and increases my desire to succeed.

Once the counsellee shared these thoughts, he was asked his thought about terminating the counselling process, and he stated he felt ready to terminate the process.

Last session: Evaluation of the counselling process/focusing on strengths/hopes for the future/post-test. In the last session, the counsellee was asked to evaluate the process and the changes he went through. He mentioned that he was very confused when he first came to counselling and that he did not know what to do. However, his ideas got clearer with the help of the information he gathered and the people he interviewed during the process. He stated that, along with making a decision, he could be more sincere towards the people around him, did not have to pretend to be happy, and was more motivated towards his studies. When he was asked to rate his level of career indecision from 0 to 10, he said he could now give himself a '9', which was a marked improvement on the '2' he gave himself at the beginning. Aside from this, the counsellee stated that he was now more hopeful about the future and motivated to achieve his goals. At the termination of the session, his strengths were emphasised by noting that he had always been very punctual and disciplined – features that would be very useful if he were to become a military officer. At the end of the session, the counsellee was administered the post-test.

Evaluation of intervention

The career counselling process was assessed by using pre- and post-test result changes in the counsellee. The Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDMDQ) (Bacanlı & Öztemel, 2017) was used to measure career indecision levels both at the beginning of the first session and at the end of the termination session. The results of the pre–post test scores for total and sub-dimensions were compared (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013).

Measure

Career Decision Making Difficulties Questionnaire – University Form (CDMDQ-UF): The original CDMD questionnaire was developed by Gati and Saka (2001). This questionnaire was first adapted for use with Turkish adolescents by Bacanlı (2016), and then the Turkish version adapted for young adults by Bacanlı and Öztemel (2017). This was the version used in the current evaluation. The factor structures of the Turkish versions were found similar to those of the original CDMDQ. Both include 10 difficulty categories embedded in three major categories: Lack of Readiness (lack of motivation, general indecisiveness, and dysfunctional beliefs); Lack of Information (the stages of career decision-making process, self, occupations, and ways of obtaining additional information); and Inconsistent Information (unreliable information, internal conflicts, and external conflicts).

The 34 items of the CDMDQ are rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 9 (*describes me well*). The Cronbach's alpha of the Turkish version was found .64 for Lack of Readiness, .95 for Lack of Information, .93 for Inconsistent Information, and .94 for the Total scale, which were similar to the original version (Bacanlı, 2016; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996; Gati & Saka, 2001). Construct validity was supported using confirmatory factor analyses, which supported the original three main factors.

Results

The pre- and post-test changes on the CDMDQ are summarised in Table 1.

The results indicated that the difference between total pre-test (114) and total post-test (57) scores was 57. This substantial difference in total scores indicates that the client's career decision difficulty scores were reduced relatively. The pre- and post-test differences for Lack of Readiness ($63 - 28 = 35$), Lack of Information ($31 - 15 = 16$), and Inconsistent Information ($20 - 14 = 6$) were consistent with the total decline. Post-test scores decreased in seven of the 10 subscales, with no change observed on three subscales (about self, unreliable information, and internal conflicts).

In order to find whether the change of the counsellee's pre- and post-test scores is statistically significant, the Reliable Change Index (RCI) values were calculated for each subscale and for the total scale. The RCI value is proposed to determine whether the magnitude of change for a given client is statistically reliable and significant. If the RCI is 1.96 or greater, this means that the difference is statistically significant (1.96 equates to the 95% confidence interval). If the RCI is less than 1.96, this means that the difference is not significant (Jacobson & Truax, 1991).

In this study, the RCI value was found to be 3.55 (>1.96) for Lack of Readiness, 2.34 (>1.96) for Lack of Information, 0.92 (<1.96) for Inconsistent Information, and 3.77 (>1.96) for total scale. The results showed that the difference in client's career decision difficulty total scores is statistically significant. In addition, the score change for the Lack of Readiness and Lack of Information subscales was also found to be statistically significant while the change in scores for Inconsistent Information was not statistically significant.

Table 1. Pre- and post-test scores on CDMDQ.

		Pre-test scores	Post-test scores
Lack of Readiness	Lack of motivation	11	3
	General indecisiveness	17	10
	Dysfunctional beliefs	35	15
	Total	63	28
Lack of Information	About career decision-making process	12	4
	About self	4	4
	About occupations	8	5
	About ways of obtaining additional information	7	2
	Total	31	15
Inconsistent Information	Unreliable information	3	3
	Internal conflicts	5	5
	External conflicts	12	6
	Total	20	14
CDMDQ total		114	57

CDMDQ: Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire.

Discussion

When the results of this study are evaluated holistically, SFBCC has been effective in helping the counsellee manage the problem of career indecision. In other words, it was observed that the counsellee's career indecision level (measured by CDMDQ) decreased markedly. In addition to this finding, the Lack of Readiness and Lack of Information levels also declined considerably. However, despite the fact that the Inconsistent Information level decrease between pre- and post-test, this decline was not found statistically significant. Aside from the quantitative measurement made, the qualitative questions used at the end of each session, which were used to assess the progress of the client in the process, suggested that the career indecision problem resolved over the sessions.

Thus, the findings of this study suggest that SFBCC is a promising approach for working with counsellees who have career indecision problem. Consequently, the findings of the current study provide several contributions to the solution-focused brief counselling and career counselling literature, theory, and practice. In this study, the outcome that a five-session, brief career counselling intervention has been effective in reducing career indecision has both supported past research and theory (Berg & Miller, 1992; Burwell & Chen, 2006; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; Miller, 2004) and showed that solution-focused brief counselling approach, as one of the postmodern approaches, could be of use in the career counselling field. Additionally, as this study used the career decision-making difficulties model (Gati et al., 1996) to conceptualise career indecision, the results suggest that this model could be usefully applied in studies using the SFBCC process.

In this study, the techniques of a solution-focused counselling (e.g. miracle questions, scaling questions, compliments, exceptions, etc.) were used during the counselling process and its principles were adhered to (De Shazer & Coulter, 2012). In addition, during the career counselling process, individual counselling techniques (e.g. empathy, respect, unconditional regard, transparency, here and now of the therapeutic relationship, confrontation, self-disclosure, etc.) were also used. Briefly, the ideas and techniques that constitute the theoretical basis of the SFBCC applied in this study have been effective in helping the counsellee deal with his career indecision.

This study is the first to report the impact of SFBCC on a counsellee who sought help to deal with a career indecision problem, and the results could be interpreted as supporting the findings of other studies that indicate SFBT is effective with individuals and groups where the counselling focused on decreasing depression, anxiety, and use of alcohol, and improving inter-family relationships and solving spousal problems (Franklin, Biever, Moore, Clemons, & Scamardo, 2001; Kaner et al., 2007; Lee, 1997; Smock et al., 2008; Spilsbury, 2012; Zimmerman, Prest, & Wetzel, 1997). Since the current study is the first to investigate the effect of SFBT in coping with an indecision problem in career counselling, the results are also consistent with the findings of previous studies that examined the effects of guidance groups, group counselling, and psycho-education interventions in managing career indecision (Essig & Kelly, 2013; Fouad, Cotter, & Kantamneni, 2009).

Limitations and future research

This study was carried out with a single subject. An important limitation of the single subject studies is the difficulty of generalising their results to other subjects, because of the small number of subjects that

are investigated. In order to develop generalisability and to prove the effectiveness of work, researchers may repeat this work in career counselling groups. This research is the first case study performed in solution-focused career counselling. The results of this study indicate that the solution-focused counselling can also be used as a career counselling and is effective in coping with career indecision.

This research has been conducted with a university student experiencing career indecision. In future studies, this study can be repeated with the clients at various developmental stages and training levels (adolescents, undergraduate students, graduates, etc.) who experienced different career problems such as career inadaptability and career development problems. In addition, the effectiveness of this study can also be tested by psychological counselling with a group of individuals with various career problems.

Furthermore, as mentioned by Sklare (2005) solution-focused career counselling is a modern method that is well suited for educational environments such as universities and high schools in terms of time and economics. For this reason, it is recommended that solution-focused career counselling may be applied at career centres of universities or guidance services of high schools in order to improve student's career development and career adaptability.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from the participant in this study.

Data availability

The datasets analysed during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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