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Vocational counselling for the students of a prestigious national college

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Abstract

The present study took place at a prestigious national college. The participants were 116 students (41 boys, 75 girls), attending either gymnasium or high school—two classes from each school cycle. The main objective was to test a set of cognitive ability scales, specifically created for career counselling, in conjunction with the personality inventory NEO PI-R and the career interest questionnaire SDS. The main hypothesis was that a series of career predictors will significantly improve vocational choice. The results partly confirm our expectations. The effect of the intervention is significant: For all the participants the degree of career congruence improved on average with 4 points.

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1. Problem statement

Career preparation represents one of the major tasks of school counselling, as it plays a major role in the insertion of students in society, and at the same time it influences aspects related to personal identity, professional identity, wellbeing and life satisfaction. Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz (1997) point out that for the majority of adults, work occupies more than one third of wake time. Moreover, work satisfaction constitutes a substantial part of the subjective quality of personal life, as it explains 20% of life satisfaction (Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976, apud Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), the quality of life having a major impact on the level of stress and on health (Adler & Matthews, 1994). Since the implications of work satisfaction are quite considerable, the question that arises is how we can improve the career decision process in order to make the best choice that would provide us with increased opportunities for living a satisfactory and fulfilling life. Researchers agree that in the career decision process are involved a series of variables, related either to the individual or to the environment. As Rounds and Tracey (1990) demonstrate, between these two types of variables there is a relation of dynamic reciprocity, a process of continuous co-adjustment: Environments influence people and, at the same time, people influence their

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environment. However, the relationship of dynamic reciprocity between the characteristics of the person and the characteristics of the environment represents a typical aspect of any adaptation process, and this makes the answer to our question not so easy to determine.

One possible answer to our question may be related to calling. Emphasizing the importance of work in our life, Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) draw the conclusion that by choosing an occupation or a profession for which we have vocation or calling, we can maximize the chances of having greater work and life satisfaction, enhanced by a subjective state of wellbeing. Hirschi & Herrmann (2013) describe calling as a psychological resource that promotes vocational development. Calling is associated to identity construction, high levels of self esteem and better stress resilience, high adaptability, easiness of taking career decisions and a strong belief related to perceived self-efficacy. Other studies (Dobrow, 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) support the idea according to which calling is a strong psychological force for self-actualisation. On the other hand, the relationships between personality, interests and cognitive structure is well established (Ackerman, 1996). Therefore, identifying the vocation or calling for a certain occupation or occupational field by exploring career options could have a positive long term effect not only on work satisfaction, but also on the quality of life of students included in counselling programmes.

At the moment the economical environment is more and more dynamic and ever-changing; the demands on the work market undergo rapid and continuous transformations. With the exception of highly specialized jobs, employment loses its stability and it is more and more unlikely that people will have the same job or profession during their entire career. Nevertheless, shifting career choice towards identifying one's calling increases the chances that students discover preferences for a highly specialized field, thus providing them with the opportunity of global personal and professional development in that specific field. Students are thus guided to identify and develop specific abilities as of an early age, the result being a higher flexibility and a higher capacity to adapt to the evolution of the work market. All this creates premises for subsequent career development at a much higher level. As early as 1909, Frank Parsons claimed that the purpose of career orientation was finding an occupation that is congruent with the characteristics of the individual. This idea was later supported by many researchers, among which was also Holland (1959), who advanced a new perspective on trait/factor theory and its implications for vocational choice, advancing the idea of vocational identity (Sampson et al., 2003).

The present study offers a model of an integrated approach on career counselling, that allows students to take a career decision in accordance with their vocational interests, as well as with their personality and aptitude structure. The accurate identification of students' aptitudes and personality characteristics increases their chances of choosing a career for which they have calling, that is, a career in which their passion, identity and the feeling of self-efficacy are expressed. This can lead to longevity and professional fulfilment, the feeling of living a significant life and to high self-esteem. These characteristics are considered by Dobrow (2013) as the defining components of calling.

A second objective of this study was to test the practical applicability of the integrated approach of career counselling. This approach is based on three categories of instruments that aim to investigate vocational interests, cognitive aptitudes and personality characteristics. One of the hypothesis was that there is a direct association between school results as reflected by the grades for Romanian language, mathematics and the grade point average (GPA)—and the results of the cognitive tests. Another hypothesis anticipates that several predictors will lead to a significant improvement of vocational choice. We also expected to find gender differences in career choice and differences related to school cycle (an elevation in vocational interests in high school). Last, but not least, we expected that the feedback offered to the participants after completing the tests would significantly improve the intensity and the congruence of career choice.

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