Strategies for coping with career indecision: Concurrent and predictive validity ☆

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Recently, Lipshits-Braziler, Gati, and Tatar (2015a) proposed a model of strategies for coping with career indecision (*SCCI*), comprising three main types of strategies: *Productive coping, Support-seeking*, and *Nonproductive coping*. Using a two-wave longitudinal design (30-week time lag), the effects of these strategies on career decision status and career decision-making difficulties were tested among 251 students in a college preparatory program. The results showed that the use of *Nonproductive coping* strategies at the beginning of the program was associated with and predicted a higher degree of individuals' career decision-making difficulties, and also distinguished between decided and undecided participants at both the beginning and the end of the program, thus partially supporting the concurrent and the predictive validity of the *SCCI*. Furthermore, a decrease in the use of *Nonproductive* strategies over time predicted a decrease in individuals' career decision-making difficulties. In addition, a decrease in the use of *Nonproductive coping* strategies and an increase in the use of *Productive* ones predicted individuals' advancement toward making a career decision. Theoretical and counseling implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Making a career decision is one of the most important decisions young adults face (Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, Lisa Asulin-Peretz, & Gati, 2013). These decisions have significant consequences for their future, including their economic and social status, lifestyle, and emotional well-being (Gati & Tal, 2008). For many young adults career decision making is a difficult, complicated process that can lead to a state of indecision with long-term negative consequences (Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou, Mylonas, Argyropoulou, & Tampouri, 2012). The difficulties that may arise can be considered as a gap between an existing state of indecision and a desired state of decidedness (Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, & Reardon, 2002). Several studies have focused on various aspects of career decision-making difficulties and developed models and diagnostic instruments for assessing them (e.g., Brown & Rector, 2008; Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996; Kelly & Lee, 2002; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008). Locating and assessing the causes of career indecision are important components of career counseling, which makes it possible to provide clients with relevant assistance (Gati & Levin, 2014).

Career indecision is considered a stressful, anxiety-provoking experience (Argyropoulou, Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou, & Besevegis, 2007). Indeed, studies have shown that it is associated with great psychological distress and low levels of well-being (Fouad et al., 2006; Multon, Heppner, Gysbers, Zook, & Ellis-Kalton, 2001). When faced with stressful circumstances, individuals mobilize

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coping responses (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) to manage the demands caused by the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are numerous conceptualizations of coping in the literature on coping with stress (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Common distinctions among the various strategies are problem-focused versus emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), approach or engagement versus avoidance or disengagement (Compas, Connor, Osowiecki, & Welch, 1997; Ebata & Moos, 1994), productive coping, reference to others, and nonproductive coping (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). Researchers also claim that it is necessary to develop hierarchical multidimensional models of coping (Schwarzer & Schwarzer, 1996; Skinner et al., 2003).

Although there is little consensus about the conceptualization, structure, and measurement of coping (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Skinner et al., 2003), a number of researchers have linked it with psychological adjustment. For instance, in their review of empirical studies of the association between coping and psychological outcomes, Compas et al. (2001) found that engagement (e.g., problem solving, information-seeking, problem-focused support, cognitive restructuring, positive reappraisal of the stressor) was associated with better adjustment, whereas disengagement (e.g., avoidance, social withdrawal, wishful thinking, self-blame) was associated with poorer psychological adjustment. However, these findings were not conclusive and the quality of adjustment appeared to be associated with the specific stressor.

According to the context-specific approach to coping, the use of coping strategies depends on the type of stressor, and individuals usually adapt their strategies to the demands of each particular problem (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Similarly, the effectiveness of a particular strategy may vary as a function of the situation in which it is used (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, the construct of coping needs to be evaluated with a specific type of stressor (such as career indecision). Furthermore, according to sociocultural theories of coping (Aldwin, 2007; Heppner, Wei, Neville, & Kanagui-Munoz, 2014; Kuo, 2011), the use and effectiveness of coping strategies should be considered within the specific social and cultural contexts in which they are used.

The importance of coping is often acknowledged in the career development literature (Argyropoulou et al., 2007; Larson & Majors, 1998; Larson, Toulouse, Ngumba, Fitzpatrick, & Heppner, 1994; Lee, 2005; Weinstein, Healy, & Ender, 2002). Lent (2013) claimed that the effective use of coping skills is one of a number of factors that foster resilience in career development and assist people in anticipating and possibly preventing unfavorable outcomes. Thus helping young adults cope effectively with their career decision-making concerns is an especially critical function for career counselors, given the potential ramifications of ineffective coping. For example, Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) claimed that overdependence on escape-avoidance strategies may have a negative impact on decision quality and outcomes.

Despite the importance of coping in career decision making, previous studies have not clearly articulated a comprehensive theory for the specific construct of coping with career indecision. Indeed, Larson and her colleagues (Larson & Majors, 1998; Larson et al., 1994) have developed the *Coping with Career Indecision* scale, which consists of four subscales (career distress and obstacles, problem solving, self-efficacy, and career myths). However, this scale was developed to distinguish among subtypes of undecided students and was not embedded in a comprehensive theoretical model of coping strategies.

Recently, to advance our understanding and knowledge of how individuals cope with career indecision, Lipshits-Braziler, Gati, and Tatar (2015a) proposed a career-specific coping model, supported by research using the *Strategies for Coping with Career Indecision* (*SCCI*) questionnaire. The major concepts of the model were adopted from previous coping theories (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Skinner et al., 2003) and adapted to the context of career decision making. The model's structural validity and the psychometric properties of the *SCCI* were supported in a cross-cultural study with American and Israeli samples of young adults deliberating about their career choice (Lipshits-Braziler et al., 2015a). In addition, the *SCCI*'s convergent, divergent, and incremental validity was also supported in three samples of Israeli young adults (Lipshits-Braziler, Gati, & Tatar, 2015b).

The *SCCI* model consists of 14 strategies that represent three major coping styles — *Productive coping*, *Support-seeking*, and *Nonproductive coping*. The first coping style, *Productive coping*, includes six strategies that facilitate coping with career indecision: *instrumental information-seeking*, *emotional information-seeking*, *problem-solving*, *flexibility*, *accommodation*, and *self-regulation*. The second coping style, *Support-seeking*, includes three strategies of involving others in coping with one's career indecision: *instrumental help-seeking*, *emotional help-seeking*, and *delegation*. Finally, the third coping style, *Nonproductive coping*, includes five strategies that hinder coping with career indecision: *escape*, *helplessness*, *isolation*, *submission*, and *opposition*. The definitions of the 14 coping strategies are presented in Lipshits-Braziler et al. (2015a).

Several researchers have claimed that coping strategies cannot be defined as productive or nonproductive until their effectiveness has been empirically demonstrated (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). In coping research, "effectiveness" refers to how well the use of coping strategies can predict adaptational outcomes (Lazarus, 1993). In addition, research suggests that coping is a dynamic process and coping strategies may change over time in response to changing demands or a changed appraisal of the situation, and as a function of the individual's coping skills (Aldwin, 2007; Holohan, Moss, & Schaeffer, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Zeidner and Saklofske (1996) stated that in investigating coping effectiveness it is important to find out whether a change from an individual's baseline coping patterns can lead to more desirable outcomes. To date, research on coping with career indecision has been predominantly cross-sectional (Argyropoulou et al., 2007; Larson et al., 1994; Weinstein et al., 2002). This limits our understanding of how coping with career indecision (or changes in coping over time) predicts adaptive or positive outcomes. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to investigate which coping strategies are more effective than others in dealing with career indecision, by using longitudinal data obtained from students in a college preparatory program in Israel. The relative effectiveness of the coping strategies was tested by how well they predicted the following adaptive career outcomes: (a) individuals' advancement toward making a career decision (i.e., becoming more decided), and (b) a decrease in the level of individuals' career decision-making difficulties (Gati et al., 1996).