

The Relationship between Negative Career Thoughts & Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

Relationships between overall emotional intelligence (EI) as measured by the Bar-On EQi and negative career thoughts as measured by the Career Thoughts Inventory were investigated in a population of career undecided non-student adults. More specifically, the factors of EI most related to negative career thinking were examined, as were the type of negative career thoughts most associated with EI. Findings revealed a significant inverse relationship between total EI and negative career thought scores. Adaptability and Intrapersonal factors were the subscales accounting for most of the variation in the career thoughts/EI relationship. Decision making-confusion was most negatively correlated with EI scores. The results suggest that assessment of a client's EI levels is important in career decision-making counseling.

Introduction

Career decidedness is a dynamic and interactive problem space (Savickas, 1995) that has been the subject of ongoing research. Originally considered a unidimensional continuum, current research has posited a more multidimensional domain (Gordon, 1998; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson & Lenz, 2004). As part of that domain, career indecision is the inability to specify a career choice within a career decision making milieu (Stewart, 1995).

Career indecision has demonstrated empirical relationships with other factors in the literature. In particular, emotional factors such as low self esteem (Chartrand, Martin, Robbins, McCauliffe, Pickerelle & Calliotte, 1994; Resnick, Faubles & Osipow, 1970; Stead, Graham & Foxcroft, 1993), neuroticism (Lounsbury Tatum, Owens & Gibson, 1999) and anxiety (Fuqua, Blum & Hartman, 1988; Holland & Holland, 1977; Larson, Piersel, Imao & Allen, 1990; Ohare & Tamburri 1986;

Serling & Betz, 1990; Skorupa & Agresti 1998; Stead Graham & Foxcroft, 1993) have contributed to career indecision.

Moreover, cognitive factors such as external decision-making style (Osipow & Reed, 1985) low problem solving confidence (Larson & Heppner, 1985; Larson, Heppner, Ham & Dugan, 1988), external appraisal of control (Fuqua, Blum & Hartman, 1988; Larson, Piersel, Imao & Allen, 1990; Taylor, 1982), and greater self appraised pressure and barriers (Larson, Heppner, Ham & Dugan, 1988) also impair career decision-making. Career indecision has also demonstrated a significant relationship to self defeating beliefs (Sweeney & Shill, 1998), lower career decision-making self-efficacy beliefs (Taylor & Betz, 1983), irrational thinking (Enright, 1996; Skorupa & Agresti, 1998; Stead, Graham & Foxcroft 1993), poor career beliefs (Enright, 1996), and negative career thoughts (Saunders, Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 2000).

Most career indecision research has largely been studied with student populations (Gordon, 1998; McWhirtner, Rasheed & Crothers, 2000), leaving the majority of adults outside of this domain of research (Weinstein, Healy & Ender, 2002). Many adults do not make career choices in college or university settings (Desruisseaux, 1998; Perry, 2003) but rather in the midst of life and work transitions such as unemployment (Amundson & Borgan, 1996; Osipow, 1999; Phillips & Blustein, 1994). Similarly, older adults make career choices under the influence of distinct developmental, cognitive and emotional factors different than their younger student counterparts (Patton & Creed, 2001; Super, 1983; Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). For these reasons the career decision making of non-student adults was explored.

The concept of emotional intelligence has become increasingly popular and hotly debated over the last decade,

and a number of instruments designed to measure this ability have appeared (Bar-On, 1997; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2002; Schutte, Malouff, Hall, Haggerty, Cooper, Golden, & Dornheim, 1998). As with many new constructs, the exact definition of emotional intelligence varies with the test designer, but all have common core features: awareness of, understanding, expressing, controlling, and managing emotions in oneself and in others (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000). Bar-On, for example, defines emotional intelligence as "effectively managing personal, social and environmental change by realistically and flexibly coping with the immediate situation, solving problems, and making decisions" (Bar-On, 2005).

The application of emotional intelligence in predicting outcomes has been researched in a variety of domains, but the main focus has been in the area of human resources management (Salovey, et.al, 2004). The role of emotional intelligence has been investigated with respect to leadership style (Coetzee & Schaap, 2003), managerial decision-making (Sayaeigh, Anthony, & Perrewew, 2004), training competence in financial advisors (Luskin, Aberman, & DeLorenzo, 2005), and worker performance and effectiveness (Bar-On, Handley, & Fund, 2006; Boyatzis, 2006).

Whereas negative career thoughts have related to various factors within career development research, it has only recently been researched within the realm of positive psychology (Lustig & Strauser, 2002). Emotional intelligence has been noted as a significant positive psychological construct (Salovey, Mayer & Caruso, 2002; Salovey, Mayer, Caruso & Lopes, 2004) with career related implications. Research exploring the relationship between emotional intelligence and career thoughts is limited. A study by Brown, George-Curran and Smith (2003) focused on emotional in-

telligence and career decision-making in a college student sample. Analysis of the data suggested that the emotional intelligence factors of Empathy, Utilization of feelings, Handling relationships, and Self control related positively to career decision-making self-efficacy, and that Utilization of feelings and Self control were inversely related with vocational exploration and commitment. Among the conclusions to their research, authors suggested that further research with emotional intelligence and career development be considered. Moreover, research with non-student adults was suggested.

The present research focused on three questions: First, what is the relationship between overall dysfunctional career thinking and emotional intelligence? Based on our reading of the literature we hypothesized that individuals with higher emotional intelligence scores would display lower levels of negative career thoughts. Second, we were interested in discovering what aspects of emotional intelligence as defined by Bar-On are most associated with negative career thinking? Third, what aspects of negative career thoughts are most associated with total emotional intelligence?

Method

Participants

The sample was 394 (160 male & 234 female) adults enrolled in a community based career decision making program funded by the Government of Canada. All participants were unemployed, career undecided and non-student at the time of research. Research participants ranged in age from 16-64 with a mean age of 37 years. Participation in the research was voluntary.

Instruments

Career Thoughts Inventory (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon & Saunders, 1996). The CTI measures dysfunctional thinking, related to assumptions, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, feelings, plans or strategies related to career choice, that inhibits effective career decision-making. The 48 item CTI total score measures a global factor of dysfunctional thinking pertaining to career problem solving and decision-making.

Three subscales measure decision making confusion (dmc), commitment anxiety (ca) and external conflict (ec). Decision-making confusion (14 items) refers to the "inability to initiate or sustain decision-making as a result of disabling emotions and/or a lack of understanding about decision-making itself" (Sampson et al., p.28). The Commitment Anxiety (10 items) scale reflects the "inability to make a commitment to a specific career choice, accompanied by generalized anxiety about the outcome of decision-making. This anxiety perpetuates indecision" (Sampson et al., p.28). The External Conflict (5 items) scale reflects the "inability to balance the importance of one's own self-perceptions with the importance of input from significant others, resulting in a reluctance to assume responsibility for decision-making" (Sampson et al., p.28). All factors negatively impact career decision making. Respondents select one of four item responses ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Examples of items are "No field of study or occupation interests me" (dmc), "I can't be satisfied unless I can find the perfect occupation for me" (ca) and "I need to choose a field of study or occupation that will please the important people in my life" (ec).

The internal consistency (alpha) coefficients for the CTI Total score ranged from 0.97 to 0.93 for student and adults norm groups. However, for the adult group in particular the alpha coefficient was 0.97. Alpha coefficients for the construct scales ranged from 0.94 (dmc), 0.91(ca) and 0.81 (ec) for the adult group alone (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon & Saunders, 1996). Convergent validity of the CTI was determined against My Vocational Situation, Career Decision Scale, Career Decision Profile and Revised NEO Personality Inventory. Principal component analysis supports the three CTI sub-factors.

Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQi) (Bar-On, 1997). The EQi measures competencies in emotional, personal and social components of general intelligence. It is a self-report instrument consisting of 133 items for which a client provides a response ranging from "not true of me" (1) to "true of me" (5). In addition to a general EQi

score, competencies are measured through five main composite scales: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Adaptability, Stress management and General mood. The Intrapersonal composite score reflects the inner self. As such it reflects the individual's self regard, emotional self awareness, assertiveness, independence and self actualization. The Interpersonal composite scale represents interpersonal functioning. As such it reflects an individual's empathy, social responsibility and interpersonal relationships. The Adaptability composite scale represents one's ability to cope with environmental demands. It reflects an individual's reality testing, flexibility and problem solving. The Stress management composite subscale represents an individual's tolerance towards stress and impulse control. The General mood composite scale reflects an individual's optimism and happiness. Examples of scale items are "I'm in touch with my emotions" (Intrapersonal), "I'm unable to show affection" (Interpersonal), "It's difficult to begin new things" (Adaptability), "I'm impulsive" (Stress management) and "I generally hope for the best" (General mood).

The Bar-On EQi manual reports an internal consistency alpha of .79 and test-retest have been reported as .85 and .75 at one month and four month intervals respectively. Factor analysis has strongly supported the total EQi structure and five composite factors.

The EQi includes three validity scales which measure the test-taker's degree of inconsistency in responding to similar items, negative impression – i.e. overly pessimistic responses, and positive impression – i.e. overly optimistic responses. The validity scales provide information as to whether the individual's responses are probably valid, possibly invalid, or probably invalid, and adjusts scores accordingly for the possibly invalid scores. For this study, any profiles classed as "probably invalid" were excluded from the data base.

Procedure

Subjects were attending a community based career decision making intervention. Assessments ascertaining negative career thoughts and emotional intelligence were administered as part of the intervention.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for CTI total and subscales and EQi total and subscales.

	CTI Total	dmc	ca	ec	EQi Total	Intra	Inter	Adapt	Stress	Mood
Mean	57.5	57.5	59.8	57.0	93.6	92.1	98.9	96.3	96.9	92.8
St. dev.	8.0	9.5	8.0	11.7	14.3	15.8	15.8	13.5	13.4	14.5

N= 392.

Note: Higher scores on CTI mean more negative career thoughts

Table 2

Correlations of Negative Career Thoughts (CTI) and Emotional Intelligence (EQi)

	EQi total	Intra	Inter	Adapt	Stress	Mood
CTI total	-.457**	-.426**	-.223**	-.433**	-.303**	-.385**
dmc	-.494**	-.471**	-.257**	-.438**	-.315**	-.442**
ca	-.319**	-.308**	-.136*	-.265**	-.263**	-.263**
ec	-.257**	-.233**	-.151*	-.232**	-.165*	-.221**

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed for all pairs of scores for EQi total, the five EQi composite scales, total CTI, and three CTI subscales. The correlation matrix for re-

lationships between EQi and CTI variables are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, a significant inverse relationship exists between all EQi and CTI variables. According to Cohen's criteria

(Cohen, 1992), the relationship between total EQi and total CTI scores reflected a medium to large effect size ($r = -.46$, $p < .001$, $n = 392$).

To determine which aspects of

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Negative Career Thinking

Predictor variables	R	R ²	Change in R ²
Adaptability	.433	.188	.188**
Intrapersonal	.468	.219	.032**
Stress management	.468	.219	.000
General Mood	.471	.222	.003
Interpersonal	.472	.223	.001

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Emotional Intelligence

Predictor variables	R	R ²	Change in R ²
Decision Making Confusion	.494	.244	.244**
Commitment Anxiety	.495	.245	.001
External Conflict	.496	.246	.001

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

emotional intelligence were most associated with negative career thinking, a stepwise multiple regression was conducted using the CTI total score as dependent variable and the five EQi scores as predictors. Results of this analysis, shown in Table 2, revealed the Adaptability and Intrapersonal composite abilities to account significantly for most of the variation in the relationship. Adaptability accounted for about 19% of the variation and Intrapersonal for 3%.

Table 3 shows the results of the multiple regression computed to determine which aspects of negative career thinking were most associated with overall emotional intelligence. Total EQi score was used as the dependent variable and the three CTI subscales as predictors. Decision-Making Confusion accounted for about 24% of the variance; Commitment Anxiety and External Conflict did not figure significantly into the relationship.

DISCUSSION

Question 1:

As expected, individuals in our study who showed higher overall emotional intelligence scores displayed less dysfunctional career thinking. This implies that those involved in career decision-making are likely better able to cope with that process if they possess more emotional intelligence. Professionals involved in career counseling would therefore likely benefit from information regarding a client's emotional functioning and modify the counseling process accordingly. It is probable that many clients will require more time to complete what others with higher emotional intelligence complete relatively quickly.

Question 2:

Results also indicated that of the five composite EQi scales Adaptability accounted for 19% of the variation in total CTI scores while Intrapersonal functioning accounted for 3%. If Adaptability reflects one's ability to cope with environmental demands in terms of reality testing, flexibility, and problem solving, it seems reasonable that a deficit in this salient aspect of EI would negatively affect one's career thinking. It is possible that someone

with good Adaptability would be better able to handle career-related changes such as new work duties, geographic moves, or changes in co-worker composition. This type of person may also have a better ability to cope with mood fluctuations that result in potentially career-inhibiting feelings of anxiety, depression, frustration, or unsettledness. High Adaptability may also indicate that someone is better able to draw on their pre-existing resources as a method of coping with career-related change. All of these coping factors may play a role in mitigating against problematic career thinking.

Adaptability, as it relates to career thinking, involves reality testing. It might be that people with high Adaptability scores are more active in analyzing their career-related problems. This could involve both their ability to recognize that there is a problem and their ability to focus on the specific issues that need attention. It is also likely that they maintain rationality as they identify and address career-related problems and have the ability to focus on what is also going well, rather than only focusing on what might not be going well.

Adaptability reflects flexibility in that people with high Adaptability may see more options that they could pursue and that they find it easier to imagine themselves doing well at other things, rather than merely focusing on their areas of weakness. They may also have a better ability to identify their resources and to apply those resources in new ways. This may enable them to minimize negative career thought and to maintain an optimistic outlook because they believe they have resources to draw upon.

Finally, Adaptability reflects a problem solving ability. People with high Adaptability may experience less dysfunctional career thinking because they are able to build upon their pre-existing abilities and build upon those abilities rather than thinking they need to start from scratch. This may indicate an ability to keep negative career thoughts minimized so that more strategic meta-cognitions can be developed. It might also be that high Adaptability involves problem solving abilities that help people find ways around or through their realistic career difficulties.

In like manner, it seems logical that a dearth in Intrapersonal functioning, which reflects the individual's self regard, self awareness, assertiveness, independence and self actualization, would result in an increase in negative career thoughts. Low Intrapersonal functioning may trigger self-defeating thinking patterns that limit rational career decision-making. These thoughts could lead to mood fluctuations that make career-coping more difficult. However, a wealth of Intrapersonal functioning may indicate a greater awareness of emotions that may enable one to compartmentalize and analyze negative thoughts more rationally. This could have the effect of maintaining a sense of optimism and balance in career thinking for these individuals.

Question 3:

Research found that decision-making confusion significantly predicted lower overall emotional intelligence. One reason for this finding may relate to the common domain shared by these two factors. In particular, decision-making confusion pertains to an individual's decision-making impairment resulting from dysfunctional emotions or lack of understanding regarding choice-making. General emotional intelligence reflects a global emotional domain whereby an individual is not only aware of emotional states but also maintains the ability to manage those emotions toward effective decisions. Though the direction of influence remains unclear it is posited that one's general emotional intelligence would contribute to one's level of functioning at a task specific level. In essence poor awareness, expression and control of one's emotions would affect, and potentially impair, career choice behavior. This supposition has yet to be tested.

Researchers were surprised by the non-significant predictive relationships between commitment anxiety and external conflict with generalized emotional intelligence. It is posited that since a non-student adult sample was studied (average age 37), external conflicts common to younger students (parental pressure, educational system, peers, etc) would not be germane. Findings indicating Commitment Anxiety being lower in older persons reflects normative data

collected by Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon and Saunders 1996. This may be due to competing roles (spouse, parent, etc...), responsibilities (mortgages, car payments, etc...), resources (working partners, real estate holdings, savings etc...), lack of options, life experience, and wisdom. Research using discrete age cohorts may assist in clarifying the developmental issues related to emotional intelligence and career thinking.

Limitations

Both tests utilized in this study are self-report instruments, and as a result scores may well be contaminated with self-perception distortions such as social desirability factors, deception, and impression management (Roberts, Zeidner, & Matthews, 2001). The difficulties with using a subjective assessment to determine one's emotional functioning have been a concern (Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2004; Schaie, 2001). It could be expected that exaggerations and misperceptions of one's negative career thoughts and emotional functioning are present in scores obtained from both instruments. Use of a more objective, ability-based measure of emotional intelligence would address at least part of this issue.

The significant relationship between emotional intelligence and negative career thinking does not infer causality – i.e. it cannot be determined from this research whether lower EI contributes directly to dysfunctional career thoughts or vice-versa. Probably they interact with each other – a relationship which needs to be further explored.

Conclusion

Brown, George-Curran, and Smith, (2003) state that “perhaps...the role of emotion is worthy of consideration when attempting to understand one's self-efficacy for career decision-making tasks” (pg.386). The current study would confirm that this is the case. Healthy emotional functioning, even when assessed by self-report, does appear to relate to fewer negative career thoughts which can only expedite the career decision-making process.

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- NOTES -