The Effects of Program Length and Participant Characteristics on Group Career-Counseling Outcomes

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In this study the authors compared two group career decision-making courses with a comparison group on such factors as occupational certainty and satisfaction, appropriateness, and information-seeking behavior. The results were mixed, but generally the 20-session course was favored by study participants.

Career-planning groups have emerged as a major means of providing career assistance to greater numbers of individuals. Groups seem to offer the advantage of being more efficient than one-to-one counseling while also improving the counseling process through support and role modeling. Many formats for groups have been used, from one-session workshops to 45-hour college courses.

Despite the generally positive perception of group career counseling, mixed results from studies of the brief workshops (one-session and two-session) have led to concern about their impact, whereas the seemingly superior long-term treatments have been questioned regarding their costs in terms of time and staffing requirements.

We conducted a study to explore the relative value of long-term groups versus short-term groups. In addition, the factors of age, sex, and reading ability were studied to further delineate the impact of group career counseling on specific populations.

The research design used was quasi-experimental and included a pretest, a posttest, and a nonequivalent control group. The short-term group (15 hours, 10 sessions) and the long-term group (30 hours, 20 sessions) were compared with each other and with a wait-control group. All participants were volunteers. Random assignment was not possible, although all groups showed equivalence on pretest measures. The courses, which were taught at a small, rural community college, were based on a seven-step decision making model: (a) making a commitment to decision

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making, (b) completing a self-assessment, (c) generating alternatives, (d) seeking information, (e) choosing an occupation, (f) making plans, and (g) taking action. The short-term course covered only the first four steps. The long-term treatment added explicit choosing, planning, and action strategies and further emphasized social learning and behavioral counseling principles, such as modeling (e.g., informational interviewing) and behavioral self-management (e.g., contracting with a partner to enact plans). Both courses used the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Strong, Campbell, & Hansen, 1981), values clarification, skills identification, and exploration of printed materials for generating career options and information. On the first and last day of class, the following were measured: certainty about occupational and educational plans, satisfaction with occupational and educational plans, congruence of occupational preference (using the Holland codes [Holland, 1973]), frequency of information seeking, and knowledge of decision making. Thus, both subjective and objective, cognitive and behavioral, and content and process measures were used, as has been recommended by reviewers of career-counseling outcome research.

Although the results were mixed, the long-term course seemed superior to the short-term course. Both groups were favored over the control group. Specifically, participants in the long-term course were significantly more satisfied with their occupational plans than were participants in both other groups. Members of both counseling groups also had higher frequency of information seeking than did those in the control group. On six of the other outcome measures, the results for both counseling groups seemed superior to results for the control group. In addition to posttreatment comparisons, the pretreatment to posttreatment change scores within groups were also examined. Members of both counseling groups had more gains on outcome measures than did members of the control group, with five gains for the long-term course, two for the short-term course, and none for the control group. Increased certainty and satisfaction about career plans stood out as significant gains for both counseling groups. It was interesting to find that the measure, number of occupations being considered, increased significantly for the short-term group but not for the long-term group, which may have been an indication of a narrowing of options for the long-term group and an expansion for the short-term group.

Other results were generally negligible, although some interesting age trends were noted. Younger participants (below age 25) were significantly favored over older participants (25 or older) on pretest decision-making skills, actual plans, and posttest satisfaction with occupational plans. In addition, younger participants had higher scores on all certainty measures, but these were nonsignificant.

Generally, this study confirms the value of career planning groups, as
evidenced by both treatment groups' significant gains on certainty, satisfaction with plans, and information-seeking behavior. This contrasts with the absence of gains on the part of the control group. These results parallel previous research, which has generally shown group career counseling to have a positive impact on career decision makers.

In comparing the two treatment groups, there is some evidence in this study for the superior value of the long-term course over the short-term one in promoting clarity about decisions. The long-term group's greater "decisional closure" can perhaps be seen in the short-term course's significant increase in the number of occupations being considered, which was not the case for the long-term course. The long-term course, which provided more extensive information-seeking, narrowing-down activities, and explicit planning steps, may have moved participants closer to a decision than did the short-term course.

If extremely short-term, career-planning courses or workshops result in a larger number of occupational options at the end of the course, then it can be concluded that such courses or workshops may increase clients' confusion if they are not complemented by additional counseling. Two provisos must be added, however, to this conclusion. First, follow-up research is needed in the future to determine whether or not participants in the short-term groups later engage in independent exploration and subsequently achieve increased closure, or if instead, brief workshops result in continued and unnecessary uncertainty. Second, all conclusions in a quasi-experimental study must be qualified by the nonrandomization of the participants. Nevertheless, it may still be tentatively proposed that, as might be expected, long-term, group career-counseling programs that have more extensive decision-making content will increase information seeking and, perhaps as a consequence of increased information, promote greater career choice certainty than do short-term programs. If this is the case, then the cost effectiveness of brief versus extensive treatments should be assessed in the future research to determine whether or not the counseling outcomes are worth the additional time, effort, and material resources.

These conclusions are based, however, on group differences. Further analysis of group-counseling research requires that subgroup and individual differences be accounted for, because the potential exists in studies of this type for group norms to submerge important individual differences. For example, individual client goals for counseling may vary from an exploratory goal of increasing the number of occupational options to a closure goal of reducing the range of options being considered. Age-related developmental factors or other individual differences, such as anxiety about decision making, may interact with treatments. Such individual differences might change counseling interventions, for example, in the relative emphasis on exploratory versus closure-oriented counseling activities.
In this study, sex and reading level were not factors in counseling outcomes although they warrant further consideration. On the age dimension, however, there was a trend suggesting that older career-counseling clients may have more difficulty with career decision making than do younger clients. If this is so, career-counseling courses may need to reflect two age-related possibilities. The first is that a large percentage of older clients who report for career counseling may have more problematic, "chronic" indecision than do younger clients. It may be true that older clients have negative self-attitudes about being undecided and dissatisfied at a later age, have an underlying psychological characteristic that limits the career planning process, or may have family or other external circumstances that make career planning more difficult than it is for younger people. If this is so, group career counseling should begin with assessment of individual attitudes, information levels, and decision-making skills. A second age-related possibility, evidenced in this study by younger participants' being significantly more satisfied with their plans but not being more certain about them, is that older clients may have more "stored information" and may be able to manage faster movement toward decisional closure. If so, the occupational information-seeking components can be condensed for those with additional experience.

This exploratory study has suggested several directions for research and practice. These findings encourage the continued development of group career-counseling models. Further research should be done to explore the relative contribution of specific treatment components through comparative studies, in which the impacts of particular counseling activities are examined. Additional research should be conducted to examine the role of client attitudes, such as self-efficacy, and of treatments that explicitly attempt to affect such attitudes. No affective measures were used in this study, but the weaker performance of older participants hints at an attitudinal dimension.

This research indicates that practitioners should limit their expectations of brief career-planning interventions, assess individual needs within their groups, and provide individualized activities based on these needs. Finally, explicit "behavioral self-management" activities, such as planning, contracting, modeling, and attention to self-efficacy expectations seem to be warranted.

REFERENCES
