

Training per il potenziamento di career adaptability, ottimismo e speranza come risorse per promuovere lo sviluppo professionale

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Sommario

Il mondo del lavoro è cambiato profondamente nell'ultimo decennio e questo ha richiesto alle persone di lavorare attivamente per costruire la propria vita professionale. Per tali ragioni, i career counselor hanno riconosciuto la necessità di considerare, nella costruzione di carriera, il ruolo di risorse, quali adattabilità professionale, ottimismo e speranza. A supporto di tali risorse è stato sviluppato un training che ha coinvolto 180 studenti di età compresa tra i 13 e i 17 anni, suddivisi equamente in un gruppo di controllo e uno sperimentale. Le analisi dei dati hanno mostrato un aumento delle risorse che il training includeva e delle differenze significative tra i gruppi dopo il training.

Parole chiave

Career adaptability, ottimismo, speranza, sviluppo professionale, career counseling.

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Training to improve career adaptability, optimism, and hope as resources to promote professional development

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Abstract

The world of work has profoundly changed in the last decade, and this has required people to actively work at constructing their professional lives. For these reasons, career counselors have recognized the need to consider the role of resources such as professional adaptability, optimism and hope. To support these resources, a training programme was developed, involving 180 students, aged between 13 and 17 years, divided equally into experimental and control groups. Data analyses showed an increase in the resources that the training included.

Keywords

Career adaptability, optimism, hope, career development, career counselling.

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Introduction

One of the core developmental tasks in adolescence is career planning (Gati & Saka, 2001; Kracke, 1997; Pyne, Berner, Magnousson & Poulsen, 2002). The current complex and dynamic socio-economic contexts are leading to situations of uncertainty, instability, unemployment and difficulty for individuals in facing the future planning of their life and career paths (Craparo et al., 2018). The changes in the world of work are contributing to unemployment, underemployment, and precarious work. It is necessary to help individuals in developing capacities for adapting to change (Blustein, Kenny, Di Fabio & Guichard, 2019; Di Fabio & Maree, 2013). Perceiving a sense of competence and examining one's career options increases the odds of finding suitable employment (Zikic & Klehe, 2006); the importance of supporting adolescents in successful career preparation is largely recognized (OECD/European Communities, 2004).

To do this, it is necessary that career counselors are sensitive to the emerging needs related to the socio-economic context and refer — in their professional practice — to updated methodological paradigms, such as the Life Design approach (Savickas, 2011a), which takes into account both the change and the role that individuals assume in their career development (Savickas, 2011a; 2011b; 2012) and allows the activation of autonomous and conscious decision-making processes (Soresi, 2000; Soresi, Nota & Lent, 2004).

Environmental barriers, opportunities, and resources are subject to individual interpretation (Astin, 1984; Vondracek et al., 1986); the individual's active input, therefore, plays a key role in processing and understanding external influences, both positive and negative, and in constructing one's own project, first in one's studies and then in one's career.

In other words, as Magnano et al. (2017) underline, in a risky society, in order to cope with an unstable world, the individual needs to develop new psychological resources, and among these we include career adaptability, optimism and hope.

Career adaptability

Career adaptability is described as «the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by the changes in work and work conditions» (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). It can be considered one of the psychosocial constructs useful for successfully facing unexpected challenges and both occupational and academic transitions (e.g., Savickas, 1997; 2002; 2005).

It comprises four resources that can be acquired and implemented (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012):

- the propensity to worry about one’s future in a positive way (concern), or the tendency to be oriented towards the future in a positive way;
- the propensity to take responsibility for the choices that are made (control), in other words to feel capable of determining one’s career;
- the propensity to be curious and explore new opportunities and possibilities, which refers to the ability to explore opportunities;
- the propensity to have self-confidence. It favours the use of advantageous ways of looking for work.

Research demonstrates the important role of career adaptability both to strengthen life satisfaction in adolescence (Ginevra, et al., 2018) and to promote positive youth development (Hirschi, 2009).

Adolescents higher in career adaptability are more successful in mastering vocational transitions (Creed, Muller, & Patton, 2003; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Patton, Creed, & Muller, 2002), use advantageous ways of looking for work (Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic & Nauta, 2010) and have a lower chance of prolonged unemployment (Fouad, 2007).

Hope

According to Snyder’s theory (1994), hope is a positive cognitive-motivational construct based on the assumption that human actions are goal directed.

Focusing on the positive developmental characteristics in adolescence, Schmid et al. (2011) have shown that levels of intentional self-regulation and hopeful future can predict belonging to both the positive development trajectories in adolescence and the negative ones characterized by depressive symptoms and risky behaviours.

Studies on academic achievement reveal that hope predicts better academic-related outcomes (Marques, Gallagher & Lopez, 2017).

It has also been found that high-hope students have greater problem-solving skills and employ fewer disengagement strategies to cope with stressful academic situations than low-hope students (Chang, 1998).

Moreover, research suggests that probably due to a greater internalization of young people’s beliefs about their future and a greater awareness of their skills (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lanczak, Hawkins, 2004), hope as well as optimism tend to decrease over time (Ferrari, Santilli & Ginevra, 2015). It would seem, therefore, as Padilla-Walker, Hardy and Christensen (2011) underline, that if hope is fundamental during the entire course of life, it is even more so in adolescence, a crucial period for future choices and goals.

For these reasons, it needs to be strengthened and supported especially in those moments of transition and difficulty that characterize adolescence (Ferrari, Santilli & Ginevra, 2015).

Optimism

Optimism can be defined as the tendency or attitude to interpret situations and events positively (Sheldon & King, 2001), and to expect positive outcomes even in the face of obstacles (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

It is connected with a series of adaptive psychological qualities (Segerstrom, 2010) and to academic and professional success (Segerstrom, 2007; Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009).

Optimism is also considered an important predictor for career goals, planning, exploration (Patton, Bartrum, and Creed, 2004) and psychological well-being (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001); on the other hand, pessimism correlates with greater perceived stress (Chang, 2002) and higher depressive symptoms (Chang, Sanna, & Yang, 2003).

Young people with higher levels of optimism have lower psychological maladjustment and aggressiveness, and higher life satisfaction and self-esteem, (Chang, 2001, Chang, Maydeu-Olivares & D’Zurilla, 1997; Extremera, Durán, & Rey, 2007); moreover, research on decision-making strategies in adolescence shows that higher levels of optimism positively correlate with more adaptive decision-making styles (Magnano et al., 2015).

Research Aims

Adopting the Life Design perspective (Savickas et al., 2009), we developed a career intervention project aimed to develop students’ career adaptability, optimism and hope, and promote reflection on their professional future.

Following the career intervention project, we expected the experimental group to report greater post-test levels of career adaptability, optimism and hope.

Method

Participants

The research involved an experimental group (training group) and a control group; the participants were 180 Italian students (94 males and 86 females), aged between 11 and 18 years ($M = 13.01$, $SD = 1.49$). The experimental group consisted of 90 participants (43 males and 47 females), with an average age of 12.97 years ($SD = 1.38$) and the control group of an equal number of adolescents (51 males and 39 females), with an average age of 13.06 years ($SD = 1.61$).

Instruments

The instruments used were:

- *The Career Adapt-Ability Scale* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), in its Italian form by Soresi, Nota, and Ferrari (2012), which evaluates career adaptability. It consists of 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = «not strong» to 5 = «strongest»). The respondent is asked to indicate how much of each skill they perceive to possess. The scale allows a general measure of career adaptability and the four sub-dimensions of career adaptability to be calculated. The latter are: concern (sample item is «Thinking about what my future will be like»), control (sample item is «Making decisions by myself»), curiosity (sample item is «Exploring my surroundings») and confidence (sample item is «Learning new skills»). In this study the Cronbach's alpha was .84 for the total score of career adaptability and from .62 to .78 for the four sub-dimensions in pre-training; the Cronbach's alpha was .90 for the total score of career adaptability and from .66 to .78 in post-training. These scores refer to both the experimental and control group.
- *Visions about future* (Ginevra et al., 2017). The scale consists of 22 items (Likert scale from 1 = «It does not describe me at all» to 5 = «It describes me very well»). The respondents are asked to indicate how adequately certain sentences describe them. The instrument provides a measure of three sub-dimensions: optimism (sample item is «I think I am an optimist»), hope (sample item is «I am sure that in the future I will be able to do something that interests me»), and pessimism (sample item is «It will be hard to find a job that really suits me»). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha in pre-training and post-training was .83 and .85 for hope, .81 and .79 for optimism and .75 and .63 for pessimism.

Procedure

Participants were involved in the activities thanks to the schools' participation in a network project supervised by the University. Randomly, five classes were involved in the activities and five classes were assigned to the control group. Each class included a number of students comprising between 16 and 22. The activities in the experimental group were carried out during school hours. The students received an invitation from the school to participate in the training project; the parents were informed about the activities (both in the experimental group and in the control group). The research was conducted by an expert in career counseling (a member of the research group). Participants were guaranteed anonymity. All parents gave their consent to participation.

The results were analysed by comparing the experimental group in the pre- (T1) and post-training (T2) phases and the experimental group and the control group in the post-training (T2) phase.

The participants of the experimental group were involved in six group meetings, lasting two hours each. Each meeting was held 10 days apart.

Within the various phases of the training programme, mainly qualitative activities were used. The use of qualitative activities allows clients to be actively involved in career counseling practices (Goldman, 1990; Savickas et al., 2009; Soresi & Nota, 2010) and is particularly suitable in the case of contexts in which it may be difficult to involve the clients (Piazza, Magnano & Zammitti, 2017; Magnano & Zammitti, 2019). The context in which the activities were proposed was characterized by high levels of school dropout, which is the reason why the use of qualitative activities was preferred.

During the first part of the training (the first three meetings), the activities were focused on getting to know oneself and one's surroundings. Beyond the real-self (what I think I am like), the dimensions of the self include also the social-self (how I think others see me) and the ideal-self (how I would like to be) (Di Nuovo & Magnano, 2013). The latter is connected, according to some authors, with the possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The analysis of the real-self and the social-self was carried out through a playful activity, followed by a focus group, on the importance of knowing one's own characteristics to be able to make choices or to better analyse the choices that have been made.

During the second meeting, an analysis of professional interests was proposed: professional interests constitute one of the most important variables in career decision-making processes (Girotti & Scurati, 2006; Zanniello, 2003, 2008). Professional interests were analysed through the qualitative use of the Iconographic Inventory of Professional Interests — 3IPs (Boerchi & Magnano, 2015), a self-report questionnaire that uses pictorial stimuli. In the quantitative use of this instrument, respondents are asked to indicate how attracted they feel by each of the 65 professions on a scale from 1 (a little) to 4 (very much). In this training meeting, based on other career education experiences (Zammitti, Magnano & Santisi, 2020), the qualitative use of the 3IPs was conducted by asking participants to choose, from the 65 professional cards of the instrument, the three most attractive professions. Each profession chosen, through a playful activity that involved a group discussion, was associated with the skills necessary for its development.

The third meeting focused on the analysis of professions and educational opportunities in the context (MIUR, 2011).

In the second phase of the training (from the fourth to the sixth meeting), more specific activities on the dimensions of optimism, hope and career adaptability were carried out.

During the fourth meeting, the students were involved in watching videos and discussing the dimensions mentioned in focus groups. Furthermore, a reflection activity on past successes and future vision was set, which aimed to stimulate an optimistic vision of the future.

In the fifth meeting, in addition to the videos, some cards from the tool «The right choice? Mine» (Magnano & Scaffidi, 2006) were used. This tool is a metacognitive guidance programme for junior high schools that arises from reflection on a series of experiences with teachers and students. Designed as a guide for teachers, «The right choice? Mine» involves the use of stimulus stories that support career counselors in conducting reflections with the class group on certain dimensions and dynamics that are activated in their choice processes, with the aim of improving students' awareness. This tool has no cognitive purposes, but rather the improvement of attitudes that can promote autonomy in school and professional choices.

Finally, in the last meeting, the students watched a film and commented in groups on its meaning, relating it to hope for their future and the possibility of adapting to changes in the world of work.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 25.0. Before evaluating the effectiveness of the training programme, an analysis was conducted to determine if there were significant differences between the control group and the experimental group at the time of the pre-test (T₁), for the variables of concern, control, curiosity, confidence, optimism, hope and pessimism. There were no significant differences between the two groups.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the training, we calculated the differences in the pre-test (T₁) and post-test (T₂) phases within the experimental group.

Results

Regarding career adaptability, differences emerged between pre-training (T₁) and post-training (T₂) in the experimental group, in the following dimensions: concern, control, curiosity and the total career adaptability score.

Regarding optimism and hope, significant differences emerged concerning the dimension of optimism. No significant differences emerged in hope.

The results are shown in Table 1.

We then compared the post-test results (T₂) between the control group and the experimental group.

By comparing the experimental group with the control group in the post-test phase (T₂), it is possible to highlight differences in all dimensions of career

adaptability and optimism. No difference in terms of hope and pessimism were found. The results are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

The training programme, in general, had positive effects on career adaptability: specifically, the three dimensions of concern, control, and curiosity improved after training. Furthermore, the participants' levels of optimism increased, and the experimental group showed higher levels of confidence than the control group.

The positive effects of such activities are various. As stated by various studies (Creed, Muller & Patton, 2003; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Neuenschwander & Garrett, 2008; Patton, Creed & Muller, 2002), adolescents who have higher levels of career adaptability are also more likely to succeed in tackling career-building tasks. Research has also shown that adolescents with higher levels of professional adaptability face educational and professional transitions with greater success (Neuenschwander & Garrett, 2008), have more positive professional development (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007), perceive themselves as more determined and projected towards the future (Nota, Ginevra & Soresi, 2012), and perceive fewer barriers and a greater number of professional interests (Soresi, Nota & Ferrari, 2012). Furthermore, an increase in the dimensions linked to career adaptability is predictive of an increase in life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2009).

Table 1

Differences between T1 and T2 in the training group

| Dimension | Pre-training (T1) | | Post-training (T2) | | p |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|----|
| | M | DS | M | DS | |
| Concern | 21.72 | 5.02 | 24.38 | 3.87 | ** |
| Control | 23.58 | 3.59 | 24.78 | 3.56 | ** |
| Curiosity | 22.38 | 3.92 | 23.88 | 3.55 | ** |
| Confidence | 25.00 | 4.01 | 24.83 | 3.77 | . |
| Career adaptability | 92.68 | 12.53 | 12.53 | 12.54 | ** |
| Optimism | 20.78 | 5.02 | 21.87 | 5.09 | * |
| Hope | 27.08 | 5.31 | 27.50 | 5.74 | . |
| Pessimism | 14.72 | 5.56 | 14.90 | 5.95 | . |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Table 2

Differences between training and control group in T2

| Dimension | Group | Post-training (T2) | | p |
|---------------------|----------|--------------------|-------|----|
| | | M | DS | |
| Concern | Training | 24.68 | 3.87 | ** |
| | Control | 21.19 | 4.32 | |
| Control | Training | 24.78 | 3.56 | ** |
| | Control | 23.07 | 3.67 | |
| Curiosity | Training | 23.88 | 3.55 | ** |
| | Control | 21.70 | 3.71 | |
| Confidence | Training | 24.83 | 3.78 | * |
| | Control | 23.56 | 4.15 | |
| Carrer adaptability | Training | 97.87 | 12.54 | ** |
| | Control | 89.51 | 12.78 | |
| Optimism | Training | 21.87 | 5.01 | * |
| | Control | 20.31 | 4.45 | |
| Hope | Training | 27.50 | 5.74 | . |
| | Control | 26.63 | 4.92 | |
| Pessimism | Training | 14.90 | 5.95 | . |
| | Control | 15.94 | 5.27 | |

* p < .05; ** p < .005

The importance of career adaptability and how people can develop this vital competency in the 21st century has been widely discussed (Maree & Di Fabio, 2015). For this reason, many authors have dedicated themselves to the enhancement of this dimension and similar results were also obtained in other experiences with adolescents (Zammitti, Magnano & Santisi, 2020), with high school students (Santilli et al., 2020) or with university students (Koen, Klehe & Van Vianen, 2012).

Optimism is a dimension related to positive feelings, lower levels of depression, anxiety, maladaptive behaviours or substance abuse (Ben-Zur, 2003; Chang & Sanna, 2003; Ey et al., 2005; Yarcheski et al, 2004). It is a dimension that positively correlates with career adaptability (Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005). Optimism is a predictor for psychological well-being (Scheier, Carver,

& Bridges, 2001) and life satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2007). Moreover, scientific literature offers several experiences of psychoeducational programmes aimed at enhancing this dimension right from primary school (Nota, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2013).

Today, adolescents engaged in decision making about their future have to deal with an uncertain and changing context that requires a certain degree of flexibility and adaptability. Learning to reflect on one's own resources and on how they can be enhanced and utilized in this process (and also in future situations) can stimulate a greater sense of agency and help individuals to make informed and satisfying choices.

Our study shows that the construct of career adaptability can be improved by career education activities, as well as the dimension of optimism, with the aim of encouraging adolescents to explore and to look positively at their contexts. These results were achieved using primarily qualitative methodologies, which took into account the uniqueness of the different life and career trajectories of the participants. These methodologies also allowed us, even in a difficult context, characterized by high levels of school dropout, to include and engage a greater number of individuals, making them active players in the training process. Our study shows that career counseling training can be supported by qualitative procedures that allow the active involvement of participants.

In the future, career counselors may consider other elements: in career counseling practices, teachers could be involved as a valid resource in the conduction of the activities. Moreover, the involvement of parents would be desirable, as they can influence identity development (Zammitti, Scuderi, & Russo, 2020).

Finally, some limitations of the study should be highlighted: first of all, no change occurred regarding the levels of hope; in addition, the study was conducted exclusively with adolescents. Additional research is needed to further test this programme with diverse targets. Considering a rapidly changing world of work, students need to enhance their resources and reflexivity to promote their current and future projects (Di Fabio, Maree, & Kenny, 2019). This study can contribute to the career-counseling field as it provides important indications to achieve these goals. Moreover, the study also emphasizes the importance of encouraging the use of qualitative approaches in career counseling and career education; in order to better meet the specific individuals' needs and achieve significant results.

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