

Therapeutic Collaboration in Career Construction Counseling: Collaborative work towards client change

Career counseling outcome and process research has been a focus of attention in our investigation group of the School of Psychology of the University of Minho. In order to deepen the process research we aimed to understand how the client-counselor relationship could help clients towards the desired change in Career Construction Counseling (CCC; Savickas, 2011), the central goal of my doctoral thesis "Career Construction Counseling: Outcome and process in case studies". CCC is a narrative intervention that emphasizes the relationship in the process of career construction and occurs throughout three phases. Counselors and clients focus primarily on problem formulation and distancing and understanding of life episodes, then clients are challenged to rewrite their career narratives, around a life theme that helps the development of a new narrative identity and new career goals and finally the dyad revises the career plans, focus on their implementation and reflects upon the changes achieved. Sustained in psychotherapy research, the Therapeutic Collaboration Model (TCM; Ribeiro et al., 2013) explains that therapeutic collaboration emerges from the interaction between counselor and client along each counseling session, towards the client's change, on a moment-by-moment basis. TCM suggests that therapeutic collaboration occurs if the dyad works in a mutual validation process in the therapeutic zone of proximal development, a space where the clients' move from their actual to their potential development. Thus, change occurs when clients are challenged and accept to take a different perspective on their problematic self-narratives and develop new meanings about their own career stories. Based on this model, the Therapeutic Collaboration Coding System (TCCS; Ribeiro et al., 2013) was developed to assess therapeutic collaboration. The counselor's interventions include supporting the problem, supporting the innovation and challenging the client. Clients' responses include validation by safety or by tolerable risk (collaborative work), invalidation by disinterest or by intolerable risk (non-collaborative work), and ambivalence (validation and invalidation at the same time). Our investigation aimed to understand how the therapeutic collaboration evolves throughout CCC intervention of six successful face-to-face cases. Participants were six Portuguese adults, five women and one man, real clients of a career counseling service. Pre-post test measures included vocational certainty, vocational identity, career indecisiveness, depressive symptoms and general well-being. The results of the pre-post-test differences in all measures in the six clients showed that all the cases registered at least one positive statistical reliable change. Therapeutic collaboration results per case for each of the three phases of the intervention showed a similar pattern for the six cases. All the dyads worked collaboratively during the intervention process.

The existence of a pattern of therapeutic collaboration during the intervention can be explained along with the counseling tasks of CCC phases. In the first phase counselors and clients start to clarify the career problem and to reflect on career constructs, tasks that demand safety to explore career problems. Counselors' interventions need to be supportive of the problematic self-narrative in order to facilitate the clients' reflection and self-disclosure. Clients respond with safety, mostly providing information. Challenge interventions also occur in a large proportion in order to help clients distance themselves from the problem and start to explore a different view. This task can be too demanding at this point and invalidation responses can arise, mostly of Intolerable Risk. In the second phase clients are challenged to rewrite a new career narrative, to reflect on a new perspective and develop new career plans. Counselors' interventions are mostly Challenging in order to help the development of a new meaning and a new perspective on career narrative. Clients' responses are mostly Secure, although the challenging nature of this phase elicits the clients' movement to their potential development through Tolerable Risk responses. Supporting Innovation interventions arise at this phase, representing the natural movement of the counselor to support the innovations clients express in their movement to their potential development. In the third phase counselors and clients revise career plans and the ways to implement them and conceptualize clients change. The continuous reorganization of the career narrative around a life theme to implement new career plans sustains the continuity of Challenge interventions from the counselors. Clients continue to need to feel secure, but their movement towards change continues with Tolerable Risk responses.

The sequence of change proposed highlights the challenging nature of CCC throughout the three phases of the intervention. Challenge seems to be an important factor for client movement towards change. Innovative responses arise from those challenges and the dyad works collaboratively in the clients' potential developmental zone. These results sustain the importance of the relationship in the therapeutic work, especially for counselors the importance of being aware of the clients' responses in every moment of the intervention process, helping them adjust their intervention to the clients' needs, especially after invalidation responses. These results also reinforce the importance of basic skills of attendance like empathy and active listening.