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Impact of Dysfunctional Career Thoughts on Mental Health among College Students Using Counselling Services

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Abstract

In recent years studies have revealed varying degrees of dysfunctional thoughts as related to career among young people. It is distorted cognitive processes that truncate the ability to make clear cut decisions regarding career. This conceptual article explores the impact of dysfunctional career thought on mental health among college students seeking counselling. This paper tries to understand how cognitive distortion regarding career impact mental health and means to mitigate this challenge. This study draws on expert opinions and experiential knowledge, underpinned by an extensive review of scholarly literature, peer evaluations, and document analysis in the field of advanced career. The author employed to deeply understand the impact of dysfunctional career thought and mental health within academic settings. By synthesizing insights and ideas from seasoned academics literatures and making an informed assessment of what the literature says about the topic, why it's important and identify gaps which will be beneficial to scholars in this field.

Keywords

Dysfunctional Career Thoughts (DCT), Mental Health, Cognitive Information Processing Theory (CIP), Cognitive Processes

1. Introduction

Impact of Dysfunctional Career Thoughts on Mental Health among College Students Using Counselling Centers

Dysfunctional career thoughts are distorted cognitive processes that truncate the ability to make career decisions among college students (Gorecki et al., 2019). This

distorted psychological process fosters unrealistic expectations, excessive fear of making wrong choices, and a skewed perception of one's abilities and job market realities, hence, creating a significant barrier, and a challenge in making informed and fulfilling career choices, most especially among college student (Hechtlinger et al., 2017).

According to Hunter et al. (2009), college years are a pivotal time of significant transformation for students (Hunter et al., 2009), characterized by vast golden opportunities and self-discovery. This period aligns with a highly functional and demanding developmental stages according to Eric Erickson theory of development, considered to be a critical stressful transitional phase (Syed, 2015). The effects of this transition are profound, most importantly as it relates to choice of career, or career decision making (Aguilar & Conceição, 2015) impacting both physiological changes, and cognitive processes that affect college student's decisions, identity, self-concept, and ultimately, their career development. Without question, this is a crucial period for the progression of vocational identity among young populace (Amaral et al., 2023).

According to (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006) college students face numerous challenges during this significant transitional period. Wood et al. (2017) identified that these challenges vary widely, including cognitive impairments that affect students' ability to make sound career judgements. These cognitive impairments and impediments range from physical disabilities, and social issues to health complications, particularly those related to academic demands. Consequently, these impairments can diminish students' confidence in their abilities, leading to a negative belief system or dysfunctional career thoughts as outlined by (Kim & Kutscher, 2020). This vulnerability to dysfunctional thoughts might explain the high incidence of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety recorded among young populace, as reported in the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) Annual Report (2015).

This report from CCMH in 2015 was a collaboration with the study by Dieringer in 2012, which found that impaired career thought has a significant impact on mental well-being. In a study by Abrams (2022) reported a relationship between pervasive pattern of thinking about one's career and future and mental health among college students in the United States. Unfortunately, according to nearly all indicators, the mental health of college students is deteriorating (Torija, 2016).

According to Chen et al. (2021), DCT is undoubtedly impacted due to varying degrees of life pressures and stressors, and struggles to survive in an evolving society, ranging from employment, demands of work, academic tasks, and the extensive responsibilities associated with family life causing a significant shift in a normal life.

In addition, current academic scholarships on mental health among college student (Chen, 2023) have shown a huge surges in mental health services demand in campus counseling centers in the last decade (Abrams, 2022) this was confirmed by the nationwide survey report of the 2021 National College Health

Assessment by the American College Health Association, that nearly three-quarters of college students reported moderate to severe psychological distress.

Research conducted by Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, and Tran in 2011 has indicated that the emotional well-being of university students has declined compared to earlier times. It was further observed that the level of mental health conditions among college students have escalated beyond what is considered typical. According to (Liu et al., 2019) research indicated that between 20% and 40% of college students experiences various levels of mental health challenges, such as psychological pain, hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and stress.

In a 2007 study, Smith, Dean, Floyd, Silva, Yamashita, Durtschi, and Heaps discovered that among those accessing services at university counseling centers, thirty-six percent were dealing with severe emotional distress. Most troublesome is that half of these student's risk dropping out unless they are being properly and effectively given therapeutic interventions. Additionally, it is possible that a significant population of students experiencing varying degrees of mental conditions such as severe depression, anxieties etc. are not maximizing the services offered by the school counseling centers.

While a study defines counseling as a professional partnership facilitating individuals, families, and groups of diverse backgrounds in attaining mental health, well-being, educational, and career goals (Francis & Horn, 2017) it is imperative that endeavors should be directed towards fostering more professional alliances with college students, also encouraging greater student engagement with this collaborative approach, perceived as instrumental in promoting mental health.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Career Indecision

In a study by Lerkkanen et al. (2016) that looks at how negative career thoughts and indecision impact the need for career guidance among high school students. The results indicated significant differences in the scores for dysfunctional career thoughts, indecision levels, and career guidance needs. In fact, 57%, $n = 297$ participants said they needed support in choosing a career, while those who needed no support were 43% ($n = 226$). This record should be a concern for every labor market, and for the economy where half of youths in high school are experiencing career indecisiveness due to dysfunctional career thought. Hence, the practical implication of Lerkkanen's study is for counselors to begin to focus on assessing high school students' guidance needs. However, If these guidance needs are not properly addressed, this can result in college graduates becoming unemployable. Because unmet guidance needs can hinder students' ability to make informed career choices, develop necessary skills, and gain relevant experience, ultimately affecting their job prospects. Based on this fact, it is crucial to provide adequate career guidance to ensure that graduates are well-prepared for the job market.

2.2. Emotional Disability

According to [Sampson Jr. et al. \(2004\)](#), career indecision involves emotional difficulties and confusion about decision-making. In addition, dysfunctional career thoughts can impair emotions and lead to confusion when making important decisions. Thus, this is supported by [Teng et al. \(2016\)](#), who found that generalized anxiety about decision outcomes, emotional imbalance, cognitive conflicts, and inconsistent information contribute to an individual's inability to commit to and perform well in a chosen career, creating a cycle of indecision. Therefore, more research is needed to understand why young people are experiencing increased emotional challenges, as this may be linked to dysfunctional career thoughts.

2.3. The Integral Role of College Years in Shaping Students' Academic and Personal Success

College years are believed to be a unique face in the lives of students. A period ([Baumgartner, 2007](#)) of transformative learning that entails undergoing a profound change in the fundamental assumptions that shape thinking, emotions, and behaviors. Academic phase is a shift in awareness that significantly and irrevocably transforms existence and interaction with the world. It represent a transformative period that is characterized by academic rigor, personal growth, and social engagement, a time in which students acquire essential capacities of diverse degrees, knowledge, critical thinking skills, and practical life competencies ([Rocks & Lavender, 2018](#)).

This phase is an experience that not only lays the foundation for students' future careers but also fosters student's independence, cultural awareness, and emotional resilience. In addition, these experiences collectively contribute to preparing students for future careers and life challenges. This then highlights the need for a supportive environment that ensures students' long-term success and mental well-being. Consequently, addressing dysfunctional career thoughts and its impact on college student's mental health becomes crucial for maintaining the quality of the educational experience.

2.4. Cognitive Impairments and Impediments in College Students

The general factors causing cognitive impairments ([Dhillon et al., 2020](#)) and impediments in college students include dysfunctional career thoughts, academic stress, physical disabilities, social pressures, mental health issues, and external stressors like financial concerns.

However, dysfunctional career thoughts remain a leading factor, leading to unrealistic expectations and anxiety, while academic stress impairs concentration and memory. Hence, a study ([Lövdén et al., 2020](#)) has proven that cognitive abilities play a crucial role in predicting educational, occupational and longevity transformation process, thus, deterioration in these abilities can impair the daily functioning of individuals.

Based on this finding (Lövdén et al., 2020), it becomes imperative for colleges and counsellors to become more aware of the longitudinal impact of DCT among students who accesses counselling centers, and take every complaints serious without discriminations considering the impact of DCT and its impediments on students' academic transformative period.

3. Purpose Statement

Though, in the last decades there have been studies on dysfunctional career thoughts and career decision making (Cheung & Jin, 2015) however limited studies have been conducted on the impact of dysfunctional career thoughts on mental health among college students. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to comprehensively explore the impact of dysfunctional career thoughts on mental health issues among college students using career services on campus. The finding is expected to inform policy makers in various universities, career counselling staff of colleges to better understand this emerging dilemma among college students. The result of this study will be of great importance to health care provider in given support to students through improved counseling services and tailored intervention strategies that address the specific needs of students at risk of academic discontinuation due to mental health issues.

4. Literature Review

Cognitive information processing theory (CIP) was developed by researchers at Florida State University, according to Osborn (2019). This theory (CIP) operationalized the concept Dysfunctional Career Thought (DCT). The CIP defined career thinking as thoughts that are associated with solving problems and future decision making. Hence, CIP opined that any thought(s) that triggers barrier or hinderance to any career belief and decision-making process is a dysfunctional career thoughts (Sampson Jr. et al., 2016). According to Osborn (2019) dysfunctional career thoughts obstruct an individual's capacity to clearly perceive their reality. These thoughts lead to doubting or undermining one's own strengths, skills, and interests. In fact, in DCT, individuals view the world and its opportunities through a pessimistic and limiting lens, individuals consequently find themselves immobilized within the decision-making process.

4.1. Dysfunctional Career Thought and the Cognitive Model

Discussions and studies on dysfunctional career thought were not developed until the rise of cognitive models in clinical counseling and therapy during the early 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, Ellis's rational-emotive therapy in 1962 and 1977, and Beck's cognitive therapy in 1970 and 1976, including Meichenbaum's cognitive behavior modification introduced in 1977 were pioneers that began the exploratory pathway of the cognitive process and behavior (Hechtlinger et al., 2017). Consequently, theorist in the field of vocational studies embraced cognition as a crucial element influencing career development and decision-making

processes (Reardon et al., 2011).

4.2. DCT and Mental Health

Interestingly, earlier Study (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2007) revealed that there is minimal research exploring the potential mutual influences between mental health and career development issues among college students. Hinkelman and Luzzo (2007) also noted that counselling professionals in both career and college counseling centers have observed that students frequently exhibit both career and mental health challenges (Lustig & Strauser, 2003). Hence, with a surge in the use of college counselling centers with few studies involved leaves a huge gap in knowledge within vocational and Rehabilitation sciences.

In the past, some theorists have made the effort to investigate career decisions and mental health issues among young people. A study by (Dipeolu et al., 2002) investigated the connection between dysfunctional career thoughts and how college students with learning disabilities adapt to their conditions. The author collected data from 153 college students with learning disabilities and 595 general college students from the normative sample of the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI). The findings showed that, compared to the normative sample, college students with learning disabilities generally exhibited fewer dysfunctional career thoughts, experienced less confusion in making career decisions, and had lower levels of commitment anxiety. This study left a gap in knowledge by comparison of categories and not showing or adapting a cause-effect approach, on how impaired cognitive process relating to career impacts mental conditions of these 153 colleges and 595 general college students. However, this study aims to explore the impact of DCT on mental health among participants at the colleges career counselling centers. Though, credit to this study underscores the fact that it gives insight to the understanding of individuals with learning disability experience on DCT (Keyes et al., 2019).

Similar to this study (Dipeolu, Hargrave, Leierer, Tineo et al., 2021) aimed to emphasize the importance of extending college transition programs into the second year by analyzing dysfunctional career thoughts among college students with learning disabilities. Result found that sophomores showed significantly higher dysfunctional career thoughts than seniors. Seniors displayed substantially lower mean scores on the CTI subscales than sophomores. This result is an attestation to the impact of transition and learning disabilities in collegiate on career thought among college student, still lack merit in detailing the impact of these transitional experience on mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety etc. (Marcotte et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, In a recent study (Amaral et al., 2023) that describes the association between career indecision and depression symptoms and/or negative thoughts among high school students, with findings showing that more decided high school students tended to have more positive affect and higher levels of well-being. Conversely, levels of depression were found to be higher in less decided adolescents. This study deserve commendation as its investigation inte-

grated vocation and mental health issues among adolescents (Werner-Seidler et al., 2017) but other studies also have shown that career decision making and complex psychological processes occur more in college students than high school students. (Yost & Corbishley, 1987) because it is a transition period from college life to the real world of pressure and survival. Thus, this study aims to explore the dynamic transition experience and the complexity of the psychological process regarding career development among collegiate.

There are studies that reported dichotomy between vocation and mental health which are traceable in studies by (Anderson & Niles, 1995; Dieringer, 2012) revealed that more than one-third of the issues faced by clients using career services were unrelated to their careers, indicating that non-career concerns play a significant role in career counseling. Also (Anderson Jr. & Niles, 2000; Dieringer, 2012) found similar results, indicating that clients appreciate opportunities for self-exploration, emotional support, and the discussion of general issues during career counseling sessions.

In contrast to Anderson & Niles (1995), study by (Fouad et al., 2006) 694 college students reported a high experiences not only difficulties in making career decisions but also concurrent psychological distress. This study by Fouad et al. (2006) agrees with Zunker (2008) study, that proposed that although personal and career counseling have traditionally been considered distinct fields, they should be approached in an integrated manner prioritizing cognitive behavior, career, and cultures and values.

Therefore, this paper is to explore the impact of DCT on mental health among college students seeking counselling.

5. Summary

This paper explores the significant impact of dysfunctional career thoughts on mental health among college students, particularly focusing on depression and anxiety (Amaral et al., 2023). This dysfunctional career thoughts among college student acts as barriers to effective career decision-making, are shown to exacerbate mental health issues during the pivotal college years—a period marked by intense personal and professional development challenges (Syed et al., 2018).

This paper operationalized the DCT from cognitive information processing theory to understand how these career thoughts contribute to mental health declines, supported with/by various empirical findings from various studies (Dipeolu et al., 2002; Fouad et al., 2006).

Therefore, the need for integrated counseling approaches that address both vocational and mental health concerns cannot be overemphasized as (Zunker, 2008) advocacy for a unified treatment paradigm. This is particularly pertinent given the findings from Abrams (2022) and the National College Health Assessment (2021) which highlight the deteriorating mental health landscape among college students, further complicated by the inadequate utilization of counseling services (Smith et al., 2007).

6. Implications

Here are some key implications drawn from literatures:

6.1. Policy in Higher Learning Institutions

A study by (dos Santos de Brito et al., 2023) reported that introduction of student oriented policies aimed at assisting students in higher education, significantly reduces dropout and promote quality of life (QoL) of students, and improves mental wellness, hence, dos Santos de Brito et al. (2023) confirms the need for a policy in the university system that would enhance counseling services by integrating vocational and mental health support. This integrated approach could better address the complex needs of students struggling with both career decisions and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. According to (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009) policies should concentrate on addressing the socioeconomic dynamics and implementing interventions among students. The objective is to alleviate the challenges that provoke dysfunctional career thoughts, which subsequently lead to mental health issues in the youth population.

6.2. Preventive Measures to Improve Mental Wellness among College Students

The author advocates for the implementation of preventive measures early in the college experience to address dysfunctional career thoughts (DCT) and prevent their escalation into more severe mental health issues. According to a study by (Hechtlinger & Gati, 2019) reported that dysfunctional career beliefs could hinder individuals' ability to make informed career decisions. Hence, this paper highlighted the importance of effective intervention measures to facilitate the transition for the young population.

Such measures could include workshops, seminars, and other educational interventions designed to enhance career decision-making skills among incoming students. But, in professional counselling the following measures are necessary to mitigate the dysfunctional career thought pervading and impacting mental health and academic success.

6.3. Counselling Skills

Study (Dipeolu, Hargrave, Leierer, Cabrera Tineo et al., 2021) revealed that career practitioners on college campuses feel inadequately equipped to tackle the fundamental issue of dysfunctional career thoughts, which complicate students' career decision-making processes and pose distinct challenges. Therefore, institutions of learning must provide adequate training and design curriculum for counsellors in identifying dysfunctional career thought among students.

6.4. Mental Health First Aid

Study has it that mental disorders emerge during adolescence or young adulthood, and these are occur during high school and college period, (Dzemaili et

al., 2023) couple with the treatment gap largely attributed to a lack of awareness, perceived need, and the stigma surrounding mental illness. This treatment gap is mostly due to lack of counsellors skilled in mental health first aid approach (Kohn et al., 2004). One thing is to identify DCT as a factor impacting mental health and another is treatment at the phase of emergency.

6.5. Psychosocial Social Support

Many young people are suffering from poor psychological and social support. Many are emotionally starved of good parenting style or support system causing mental health stigma (Xiang et al., 2024) and others are disconnected to religion and faith which study prove it connectedness to good mental health. (Forouhari et al., 2019) more study prove that those without faith nor religion reported high on mental health issues than those who have faith. (Davis et al., 2003) therefore, policies on good parental style and morals must be established by relevant authorities, and faith based education must be entrenched in the school curriculum, by giving psychological and social support mental health will improve.

7. Further Research

This paper opens the opportunity for a call for longitudinal studies to track the progression of these issues over time and to explore the effectiveness of specific policies and interventions designed to mitigate DCT impact. This avenue for further research on the causal relationships between DCT and mental health outcomes is strongly recommended.

8. Conclusion

Dysfunctional career thoughts are increasingly recognized in scholarly research as a significant problem among college students, leading to a rise in mental health crises and a heightened risk of school dropouts. This paper, through a comprehensive review of academic literature, has illuminated this major health concern in the United States. Consequently, there is an urgent need for policy development and interventionist approaches to address this growing issue. Therefore, implementation of the right programs and policies on campuses will tremendously improve career services, empower college students who may have challenges formulating career choices due to psychosocial burdens. This paper influences the next thought of study on dysfunctional career thoughts and mental health among college students.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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