

EFFICACY OF THERAPEUTIC ASSESSMENT  
IN COUNSELING FOR CAREER INDECISION

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Psychological  
and Cultural Studies  
(Counseling Psychology)

Under the Supervision of Professor William E. Hanson

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 2004

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Efficacy of Therapeutic Assessment in Counseling for Career Indecision

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EFFICACY OF THERAPEUTIC ASSESSMENT IN COUNSELING  
FOR CAREER INDECISION

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University of Nebraska, 2004

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Therapeutic Assessment (TA), a collaborative style of providing test feedback, was examined for its efficacy in improving forty-two participants' commitment to career choice and career exploration behaviors, relative to an Information-Giving (IG), or 'standard' style, and a delayed-treatment control group, after each of two sessions of career assessment, and at a two-week follow-up.

During the 45-minute first session, participants in the TA experimental condition met with a counselor to generate at least three career-related questions that they wished to have answered by the Strong Interest Inventory (SII), set goals for the assessment, and collaboratively discussed their current career-related concerns. During the 45-minute second session, they received results of the SII in accordance with the TA model.

'Standard' treatment participants also met with a counselor for a 45-minute first session, however, the

counselor utilized the session to gather information about the participants' career-related concerns. Participants received the results of the SII in accordance with a 'standard' model during the 45-minute second session.

Participants in the delayed-treatment control group received 'standard' TI feedback after the conclusion of the study.

In regard to participants' perceived session quality, the results indicated a main effect for time on the dimension of depth as measured by the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ). Participants in both the TA and IG experimental conditions reported significantly higher depth scores after the TI feedback session, relative to their initial session with a counselor -- indicating that they found the TI feedback session to be more powerful and valuable. Implications for career assessment practice and future research are discussed.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my adviser, Dr. Bill Hanson, for allowing me to satisfy my curiosity about applying Therapeutic Assessment to career assessment. I appreciate his support and guidance, and for showing me how to think more clearly about process and outcome research.

I would also like to thank Dr. Roger Bruning, Dr. Calvin Garbin, and Dr. Michael Scheel, the other members of my dissertation committee, for their support and helpful comments.

This study would also have never seen the light of day without the assistance of my classmates. I am grateful to Summer Allen-Portsche for greatly assisting with data collection; to Kelly Petska, Epiphania Bonsi, Chris Gibbon, Kyle Curry, and Maria Vu, the study's counselors; and to Heather Reeson Lambert, Corinne Ortega, and Diana Paulk, the study's raters. Special thanks are also extended to Dr. Jenenne Geske for her statistical consultation.

And, many thanks to Kate Barrett, Carey Pawlowski, Heather Reeson Lambert, and Diana Paulk for your encouragement and camaraderie throughout graduate school.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract. . . . .	i
Acknowledgements. . . . .	iii
Table of Contents . . . . .	iv
List of Tables. . . . .	vi
List of Figures . . . . .	vii
 1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW . . . . .	 1
1.1 Definition of Terms. . . . .	4
1.2 Theory and Research on Therapeutic Assessment. . . . .	7
a. Theoretical Background:Therapeutic Assessment . . . . .	7
b. Empirical Findings. . . . .	10
c. Summary of Findings . . . . .	20
1.3 Theory and Research on Career Indecision . . . . .	22
a. Theoretical Background: Career Indecision . . . . .	22
b. Empirical Findings: Career Indecision Process and Outcome . . . . .	29
c. Summary of Findings . . . . .	41
d. Empirical Findings: Test Interpretation Feedback. . . . .	43
e. Summary of Findings . . . . .	68
1.4 The Present Study. . . . .	70
1.5 Research Hypotheses. . . . .	75
 2. METHOD . . . . .	 77
2.1 Participants . . . . .	77
a. Student Volunteers. . . . .	77
b. Counselors. . . . .	79
2.2 Instruments. . . . .	79
a. Demographic Questionnaire . . . . .	81
b. Career Interest Inventory . . . . .	81
i. Strong Interest Inventory. . . . .	82
c. Outcome Measures. . . . .	82
i. Commitment to Career Choices Scale (CCCS) . . . . .	82
ii. Career Exploration Survey (CES) . . . . .	83
c. Process Measures. . . . .	85
i. Assessment Questionnaire-2 (AQ-2) . . . . .	85
ii. Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ). . . . .	86
2.3 Procedure. . . . .	87

a. Recruitment of Participants . . . . .	87
b. Training of Counselors . . . . .	88
c. Procedures. . . . .	90
d. Data Analyses . . . . .	93
3. RESULTS. . . . .	96
3.1 Preliminary Analyses . . . . .	96
3.2 Test of Research Hypotheses. . . . .	96
4. DISCUSSION . . . . .	111
4.1 Implications of Findings . . . . .	116
4.2 Limitations of Study . . . . .	118
4.3 Directions for Future Research . . . . .	121
5. REFERENCES . . . . .	124
6. APPENDIXES . . . . .	149
6.1 Appendix A: SII TI Feedback Counselor Training Manual. . . . .	150
a. Test Interpretation Feedback Protocols. . . . .	151
i. Therapeutic Assessment. . . . .	152
ii. Information-Giving, or "Standard" . . . . .	160
iii. Delayed-Treatment Control Group . . . . .	165
6.2 Appendix B: Measures . . . . .	173
a. Demographic Sheet . . . . .	174
b. Commitment to Career Choices Scale (CCCS) . . . . .	175
c. Career Exploration Behaviors (CES). . . . .	178
d. Assessment Questionnaire-2 (AQ-2) . . . . .	181
e. Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ). . . . .	183
6.3 Appendix C: Rater Protocol Checklists. . . . .	184
6.4 Appendix D: Recruitment Scripts and Informed Consent. . . . .	189
a. Participant Recruitment Script. . . . .	190
b. Participant Informed Consent. . . . .	191



## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants. .	78
2 Overview of Study Variables and Instruments. .	80
3 Means and Standard Deviations of the Outcome Measure Subscale Scores for Three Experimental Conditions and Testing Times . . . . .	98
4 Intercorrelations Among the CCCS and CES Outcome Measures . . . . .	102
5 Means and Standard Deviations for the Process Measure Subscale Scores for Three Experimental Conditions and Testing Times . . . . .	105
6 Intercorrelations Among the AQ-2 and SEQ Process Measures . . . . .	108

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Study Design. . . . .	74
2 Graph of Depth Subscale Scores by Experimental Condition and Time. . . . .	110

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction and Literature Review

Career assessment, including the use of tests in career counseling, has been one of the distinguishing features of counseling psychology (Chartrand & Walsh, 2001). In fact, according to Watkins, Campbell, and Nieberding (1994) nearly sixty percent of all counseling psychologists provide career assessment services in varying degrees, in a wide variety of settings. These services have included the use of tests in the evaluation of a client's vocational interests, abilities, knowledge, skills, and/or values with the primary goal of assisting clients in the career decision-making process, career transition process, or in making a career change (Carson & Dawis, 2000).

From a historical perspective, in the 1960s and 1970s career assessment and testing in practice was a "test and tell" phenomenon, or as Crites (1981) described it, "three sessions and a cloud of dust" (p.49). Typically, the purpose of career assessment and testing was to administer test instruments, and provide test results to clients. This characterization originated from Williamson's (1939) assertion that the counselor was a benevolent expert serving a studious client (Chartrand & Walsh, 2001).

Crites (1981) challenged the field of vocational psychology to move to, as he stated, "involving the client as an active participant in the assessment process, not simply a passive recipient of information gathered from tests (p. 125). Thirteen years later, Watkins, Campbell, and Nieberding's (1994) stated that career assessment is now "a means by which we can actively involve clients in the process, help them know more about themselves and, as a result, have a more informed view when making career decisions. Much of this seems to come down to empowering clients---making them better masters of their fate---and that seems about the best reason of all to provide vocational assessment services" (p. 125). Brown and Krane (2000), with tongue planted firmly in cheek, described career assessment and counseling now as "four (or five) sessions and a cloud of dust" (p.740).

The notion of actively involving clients in the career assessment and testing process has been discussed for quite some time now (e.g., Boggs, 1998; Prince, 1998; Savickas, 1995; 1998). Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, and Lenz (2000), for example, emphasized the importance of a "collaborative approach during career assessment that includes the establishment of assessment goals and ensuring that the

assessment affirms that clients are capable of understanding their needs and are actively participating in the service delivery process" (p.149).

Almost no empirical research, however, related to the active involvement of clients during the career assessment and test interpretation process has been undertaken. Aside from Hanson, Claiborn, and Kerr (1997), who studied the differential effects of two styles of career interest inventory test interpretation (TI) feedback (interactive and delivered) on session process variables, no empirical studies have investigated the effects of collaborative test interpretation on career assessment and testing processes and outcomes.

Although the field appears to agree upon the importance of involving clients during the career assessment and testing process, including during the interpretation of their test results, a variety of questions remain to be addressed empirically. For example, is collaborative assessment more effective than an Information-Giving style? This question is the focus of the study reported here.

Hanson and Goodyear (2000), Tinsley and Chu (1999), and Whiston (2001) suggested that more empirical research

in this area is needed. In several meta-analyses, Oliver and Spokane (1988) found individual career counseling to be effective overall with an effect size of .74 in 16 studies; group test interpretation effective with an effect size of .76 in four studies, and individual test interpretation to be effective with an effect size of .62 in two studies. Whiston, Sexton, and Lasoff (1998) found effect sizes of 1.08 and .36 for individual career counseling and group test interpretation, respectively, in three studies of each type of treatment. Chartrand and Walsh (2001) lamented, though, "the lack of conclusive data that explicitly supports the use of testing in career guidance and counseling is an obvious problem that requires immediate attention" (p. 249).

Therefore, as the present study focused on examining the effects of Therapeutic Assessment (TA) compared with an Information-Giving (IG), or "standard," style of career assessment and testing, a clarification of the meaning of the terms "TA," "IG," "test interpretation (TI) feedback," and "career indecision (CI)" follows in the section below.

#### Definition of Terms

##### Therapeutic Assessment

Therapeutic Assessment is an assessment model in which psychological testing forms the center of a brief psychotherapeutic intervention with clients. Resting on the principles set forth by Fischer (1994). Therapeutic Assessment attempts to engage clients in a collaborative, exploratory process through which they learn about the factors maintaining their current life problems and try out possible solutions to these problems. The techniques of Therapeutic Assessment can be applied to a wide variety of assessment contexts and client populations (Finn, 1996; p. 359).

TA involves the client as a collaborator in the assessment, encourages the client to formulate specific questions that the assessment and TI feedback can answer; addresses clients' personal goals for the assessment and ensures that these goals are met; provides TI feedback in an emotionally supportive manner in which clients feel affirmed and less anxious; and provides TI feedback that is "understandable, personally relevant, and useful to the client, in a way in which the counselor and client work together to make the test results meaningful to him or her" (Hanson & Goodyear, 2000, p. 2). TA also allows the client to learn new ways of thinking and feeling about themselves, explore these new understandings, and relate them, in the context of the present study, to their career choice concerns. TA, therefore, has transformative goals wherein

the client may experience change as a result of the process (Finn & Tonsager, 1997).

#### Information-Giving, or "standard," style

An IG style of providing TI feedback refers to communicating test results without eliciting intentionally the involvement of the client, e.g., presenting test results without working with the client to make the test data meaningful to him or her. IG includes three primary steps: a) gathering data, b) deductive interpretation of assessment data, and c) making recommendations to the client. IG is also a means to make decisions about clients, i.e., the degree of career indecision. The focus of the assessment is on test scores, and decisions to be made about the client after the assessment is completed. The role of the assessor is one of an objective observer, and success of the assessment measured by how accurate the information gleaned from the assessment is, or how correct the decisions made after the assessment are. (Finn & Tonsager, 1997).

#### Test Interpretation Feedback

Test interpretation (TI) feedback is a counselor's verbal provision of test results to a client. TI feedback can be provided in a number of ways. For the purposes of



the present study, however, TI feedback will be provided either in a TA style or an IG, or "standard" style.

### Career Indecision

CI is the state of having difficulties in setting a career goal, in particular, either the inability or unwillingness to choose a career goal, or having the feeling of uncertainty toward an expressed career goal (Callahan & Greenhaus, 1992).

### Theory and Research on Therapeutic Assessment

#### Theoretical Background: Therapeutic Assessment

A collaborative method of assessment was developed by Stephen Finn, a clinical psychologist (Finn, 1996; Finn & Tonsager, 1992; 1997). Finn and colleagues suggest that assessment and the provision of TI feedback be incorporated into a brief therapeutic experience.

The theoretical underpinnings of Finn's model are based on self-verification (Swann, 1983), self-enhancement (Shrauger, 1972), self-psychology (Kohut, 1971; 1977; 1984), and self-efficacy theories (Bandura, 1986). The primary assertion of self-verification theory is that people work to bring others to see them as they see themselves, and to make their social environments more compatible with their self-conceptions. Self-enhancement

theory, on the other hand, posits that people seek positive, subjectively accurate, or in other words, self-enhancing feedback.

These theories relate to career assessment and providing TI feedback because people will engage in a wide variety of cognitive and affective strategies to reject feedback that is discrepant with their self-conceptions (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). As self-enhancement theory predicts, Swann, et al., (1989) found that people with low self-esteem and high self-esteem preferred feedback regarding their positive rather than negative views of themselves. As self-verification theory would predict, the same people who sought favorable feedback related to their positive self-conceptions sought unfavorable feedback regarding their negative self-views, regardless of their level of self-esteem.

A conclusion that may be drawn from these results is that although people tend to seek positive feedback about their positive self-views, when they seek feedback regarding their negative self-views, they prefer unfavorable, or negative feedback. As to whether people self-enhance or self-verify at any given time depends,

according to Swann and colleagues, on how positive the relevant self-conceptions are, rather than his or her level of self-esteem or the type of person they are. Schlenker (1980), however, believes that if people are forced to either self-enhance or self-verify, they will self-verify.

This poses a challenge for counselors during the provision of TI feedback. Not only will clients typically prefer to hear positive TI feedback statements and those consistent with their self-conceptions, they may reject TI feedback that is discrepant with their self-concepts.

Another tenet of Therapeutic Assessment, Kohut's self-psychology theory, has been applied to career development by researchers such as Patton, Connor, & Scott (1982), Robbins (1987), and Robinson and Cooper (1988). The application of Kohut's theory to career decision-making has centered on the construct of the self, as summarized below.

Kohut theorized that the individual develops a self-system that serves as the initiating center of the personality. This self-system is composed of structures that are the result of development along two co-existing lines, the idealizing and the grandiose-exhibitionistic. The child develops along the idealizing line by first forming an idealized picture of the parent(s) as powerful and strong. This picture promotes the young child's sense of self-esteem and cohesion. In time, a system of goals and ideals is internalized that bolsters self-esteem and directs native talents and skills. Career indecision,

low self-esteem, and poorly formulated interests may result from a lack of consolidation in the idealizing sector of the self (Robbins, 1987, p.288).

TA coincides with this view by providing positive, accurate mirroring that serves to strengthen the idealizing and grandiose sectors of the self in an assessment and TI feedback experience. This is accomplished by assisting in consolidating the idealizing sector and mirroring the client's positive self-concepts as contained in the grandiose sector.

#### Empirical Findings

Two studies initially examined the absolute efficacy of TA. Finn and Tonsager (1992) investigated the effects of providing Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) TI feedback to college students awaiting psychotherapy. Sixty (42 women and 18 men) outpatient clients served as participants in the study, a 2 (treatment group: TA, and a no-treatment control group) x 3 (time) repeated measures design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Participants in the TA condition met with a therapist at Time 1 for a 30-minute interview to develop questions for the assessment, to learn about the purposes of the assessment, and to discuss current concerns. Following the interview, participants

completed the MMPI-2 and the other independent and dependent measures used in the study. At Time 2, two weeks later, the therapist met with participants individually to discuss their MMPI-2 results. Feedback sessions were conducted according to the TA model developed by Finn, later articulated in a book (Finn, 1996). After the TI feedback session, participants completed the dependent measures. At Time 3, approximately two weeks following the TI feedback session, each client received the dependent measures in the mail along with a stamped, return envelope.

Participants in the control condition met with a therapist at Time 1 to discuss their current concerns. Participants then completed the independent and dependent measures. Two weeks later, at Time 2, the control group met with the therapist for 30 minutes to discuss their current concerns or reactions to the study. They then, again, completed the dependent measures. At Time 3, two weeks later, these clients received the dependent measures in the mail with stamped, return envelopes.

Results indicated that compared with a control group, clients who received their MMPI-2 test results reported a significant increase in self-esteem, and felt more hopeful about their problems, both immediately following the test

feedback session, and at a 2-week follow up. At that time, a significant decline in symptomatic distress was also found. Although the study failed to identify specific client variables or elements of the TI feedback session that were related to these changes, the findings suggested that psychological assessment could be used as a therapeutic intervention. Methodological limitations of the study included utilizing one of the investigators--who was fully aware of the hypotheses--as the counselor; and utilizing raw gain (or difference) scores to compute change.

In a replication study, Newman and Greenway (1997), addressed several design issues found in the Finn and Tonsager (1992) study in addition to examining the effects of providing MMPI-2 TI feedback to college students awaiting psychotherapy. Sixty university students (46 women and 14 men) served as participants in the study, a 2 (treatment: TA group and a delayed-treatment control group) x 3 (time) repeated measures design. Participants were randomly assigned to treatment groups. Participants in the TA group met with a therapist at Time 1 to formulate questions to be answered by the assessment, discuss their current concerns, and learn how the assessment would

proceed. Participants then completed the MMPI-2 and the dependent measures. At Time 2, two weeks later, each client discussed his or her MMPI-2 with the therapist according to the TA model developed by Finn and Tonsager (Finn, 1996; Finn & Tonsager, 1992). Participants, again, completed the dependent measures. Approximately two weeks later, participants received the dependent measures in the mail for their completion and return in stamped, return envelopes.

Participants in the control group met with the therapist at Time 1 for a 30-minute interview to discuss their current concerns and learned how the assessment would proceed. As in the experimental condition, the therapist asked participants to suggest questions for the assessment. Following the interview, each participant completed the MMPI-2 and the other measures used in the study. At the second meeting at Time 2, two weeks later, the therapist met briefly with the participants to clarify or add questions to be considered in the assessment. Following this brief interview, clients completed the dependent measures used in the study. At Time 3, approximately two weeks later, each participant met with the examiner,

completed the dependent measures, and then received feedback according to the model developed by Finn (1996).

In this study the MMPI-2 was administered to control group participants to rule out that simply completing the MMPI-2 resulted in some therapeutic benefits. In addition, the data was analyzed using different statistical methods than the 1992 study to ensure that significant results had not been found from using raw gain (or difference) scores to compute change.

Results indicated that TA participants, relative to the delayed-treatment control group, also reported a significant increase in self-esteem immediately following the TI feedback session, and a significant decline in symptomatic distress at a 2-week follow-up. This study also failed to identify specific client variables or elements of the TI feedback session that were related to these changes. Overall, though, the findings from the two studies provided initial empirical evidence for the absolute efficacy of psychological assessment as an effective therapeutic intervention.

One limitation of the Finn and Tonsager (1992), and Newman and Greenway (1997) studies; however, is that one of the investigators--fully aware of the study's hypotheses--