

VOCATIONAL CHOICE AS A SOURCE OF STRESS Nuria Cortada de Kohan *

Resumen

En muchos casos difíciles de *orientación vocacional* se perciben en los jóvenes, síntomas de estrés que no se presentan en aquellos estudiantes que pueden realizar una rápida elección. Nuestra experiencia en orientación vocacional demostró que en algunos casos los síntomas de *estrés* impedían que los jóvenes pudieran pensar claramente acerca de su necesidad de información y orientación. Algunos estudiantes manifestaron su preocupación por su dificultad para decidirse por alguna carrera, a otros les resultaba difícil concentrarse para buscar información y otros realmente no parecían capaces de enfrentarse a las circunstancias de comenzar un nuevo rol, como estudiantes universitarios. Desde que Hans Selye (1956) de la Universidad de Montreal adoptó de ingeniería la palabra *stress*, para describir respuestas no específicas del organismo a alguna agresión, se han publicado más de 150.000 artículos que explican su naturaleza y sus efectos sobre la fisiología y la salud mental. En el presente trabajo se tuvieron en cuenta especialmente los conceptos de Lazarus (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) que considera al *estrés* psicológico como una relación particular entre la persona y el medio ambiente, que es evaluada por la persona como algo que contribuye o sobrepasa sus recursos y pone en peligro su bienestar. El estrés en este sentido supondría dos procesos críticos: (1) la *evaluación cogniti-*

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va y (2) el *afrontamiento*. El objetivo de la investigación que se informa fue comparar dos muestras de participantes: (a) los que podían orientarse fácilmente y (b) aquellos que posiblemente sufrían estrés. Se aplicaron tres pruebas: el Test de Conflictos de Personalidad (Cortada & Kohan, 1998), la Escala EAE de Apreciación de Estrés (Fernández Seara & Mielgo Robles, 1992) y una adaptación del *Coping Responses Inventory* (Moos, 1993). Los resultados en general, presentaron diferencias significativas entre ambos grupos. Probablemente los jóvenes que presentan dificultades en la elección vocacional sólo demuestran una vez más su inseguridad básica, manifestándola claramente con síntomas de estrés.

Palabras clave: Orientación vocacional - estrés - conflictos de personalidad - respuestas de afrontamiento.

Abstract

In many cases of *vocational choice* the young people show *stress* symptoms. These do not appear in those students that are able to decide easily which career to chose. We inform here about the comparison of two representative samples of extreme cases. We used three psychometric instruments: the Test of Conflicts of Personality (Cortada, & Kohan, 1998), the Scale EAE to Evaluate Stress (Fernández Seara, & Milgo Robles, 1992), and an adaptation of the Coping Responses Inventory (Moos, 1993). The general results showed significant differences between the two samples. Probably the adolescents who have problems in their vocational choice, only show once more their basic insecurity, and their overt manifestation are the stress symptoms.

Key words: Vocational choice - stress - personality conflicts - coping.

Introduction

The main purpose of this report is to inform about our findings related with the problems of stress in some students, when they try to make up their mind about their career choice.

Our previous experience in vocational guidance showed us that in some cases the symptom is impairing the youngsters to think clearly about their need for information or for counselling. Many of the students stated that they could not sleep well because of their difficulties for taking a decision. In some other cases the students finishing secondary school said that it was so difficult for them to concentrate in seeking information that they preferred to start working but not to start studies about something that may be they would not like after some time. Some others seemed really not being able to cope with the circumstances of starting the new role as university students and still others stated that could not cope with the problems that came out between their parent's wishes and their own expectation.

Since Hans Selye (1956) from the University of Montreal, adopted from engineering the word *stress* to describe responses non specific from the organism when exposed to some aggression, more than 150,000 papers have come out to explain its nature and its effects on physiological and mental health. Selye developed the construct of *general adaptation syndrome* to describe the body's common reaction to all types of stressors. According to the theory our physiological adjustment to stressors occurs in three stages:

- 1.- An initial alarm reaction during which certain organs of the body are alerted (such as the arousal of the sympathetic nervous system).
- 2.- A stage of resistance, during which these organs function at abnormal levels for a prolonged period of time to maintain defense against the stress (such as increased production of white blood cells).
- 3.- A stage of exhaustion, when the body resources against stress are exhausted.

At the present stress is referred to, as a series of specific problems of the organism. There are two types of stressors:

- 1.- Those of psychosocial type made so because of the cognitive interpretation or signification that is attributed to them (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984), and
- 2.- those stressors of biogenic type where the same stressor has some

electrical or biochemical property able to produce some stress response.

At the end, *stress* can be considered as an unbalancing between exigencies and resources of the subjects that can be momentaneous or sustained (Ader, & Cohen, 1993).

Intimately related with stress are the *constructs of coping* (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984), *locus of control* (Rotter, 1975), *self efficacy* (Bandura, 1977, 1982), *predictability* (Cohen, 1989), and *sense of coherence* (Antonovsky, 1987).

Methodology

The objective of this research was to see if really those students that have severe problems in choosing carers suffered from stress. We decided to collect a sample of students that have shown in the preliminary interviews a great confusion in their vocational choice for different reasons, but always stating their great difficulties to make up their minds about career choice. Of course this was not a random sample. On the other side, we selected a sample of young students that were the same age and socio-economic level aproximatedly but that were already studying normally in different colleges, and universities (first year psychology, medicine, laws, economics and so on) and some of them were also work. To both of these groups we administered three tests:

1.- A test called (CP) Conflicts of Personality (Cortada, & Kohan, 1998). This is a scale made up by Thurstone's type of equal intervals which tries to detect those youngsters who have deep personality conflicts. We had for this scale the norms made up with a group of secondary school students. The test has 70 items of which the subject has to select 10 of which he or she agrees. This is essentially a screening test for severe personality problems.

2.- A Test of Stress (SOV) that was a slight modification of the EAE-G Test (Fernández Seara, & Mielgo Robles, 1992). The changes of this General Scale of Stress were in the phrasing of some items since it was constructed for adults and also in the wording since this was a Spanish test and we had to change some words not usual in Argentina. It is a scale Likert type, with 53 items related to four areas, *health, human*

relations, life style, and economic and labor problems. These last type of items were rephrased in relation with educational and vocational guidance problems. We did not have norms for this scale, only the Spanish norms for adults.

3.- The Coping Responses Inventory (Youth form of CRI from Moos, 1993). This test was translated and used for the first time and we had no norms for it except the American norms. It is a measure of eight different types of coping responses to stressful life circumstances. The CRI combines the approach that emphasizes the *focus of coping* (problem focused or emotion-focused), and the approach that emphasizes the *method of coping* (which can be cognitive or behavioral). The test has a first set of four scales that measure *approach coping*; the last set of four scales, measure *avoidance coping*, and the first two scales in each set reflect *cognitive coping strategies*, while the third and fourth scales in each set reflect *behavioral coping strategies*. So the scales and its descriptions can be seen in Table 1.

The design of the research was very simple. We had a group of 31 very confused students at the moment of starting their vocational information (we shall call it *Group E*) and a group of 43 students that have already made their career choice the previous year, and seemed satisfied with their study choices (we shall call it *Group C*). Were there differences in the tests results of the two groups?

As for the CP Test the results did not show differences. This seemed to us quite reasonable since CP is a test of screening for deep personality problems such as schizophrenic symptoms and our students were all basically healthy (see Table 2).

As for the SOV, the results showed that the group of confused students have a higher mean than the Spanish norms. We could not apply this test to the control group. The results in the CRI Test are more interesting and shall be analyzed later. These results can be seen in Tables 3, and 4.

As can be seen clearly in Table 4 and Graph 1, the mean scores of approach coping are higher in the control group while the mean scores of avoidance coping are higher in the experimental group. Almost all differences were at significant levels.

It is quite easy to understand quite clearly why this group of youngsters have difficulties in making choices since *Positive Reappraisal* and *Problem Solving* are associated with more self-confidence which is

necessary for a good career choice. Instead *Cognitive Avoidance*, *Acceptance or Resignation*, and *Emotional Discharge* are significantly related with an increase in depression and anxiety (Roth, & Cohen, 1986).

Although we know that our data are scarce we have the inter-correlations of the three instruments. We correlated the results in the group of vocational guidance students between the CP (Test of Conflicts of Personality), the SOV (Test of Stress) and the eight scales of the Coping Inventory. The results can be seen in Table 5.

In Table 5, we can see that the SOV is correlated with *Cognitive Avoidance*, *Acceptance or Resignation*, and *Emotional Discharge* but not with the first four scales. That could be interpreted in some sense as an approach to the validity of our data.

Still we consider these results only provisional, but we are interested to follow this research with larger samples and more information with other statistical techniques. We believe that really vocational choice produces stress but why only in some students this is still a mystery.

Table 1

| |
|---|
| <p>Approach coping responses</p> <p>1.- <i>(LA) Logical Analysis</i>: Cognitive attempts to understand and prepare mentally for a stressor and its consequences.</p> <p>2.- <i>(PR) Positive Reappraisal</i>: Cognitive attempts to construe and restructure a problem in a positive way while still accepting the reality of the situation.</p> <p>3.- <i>(SG) Seeking Guidance and Support</i>: Behavioral attempts to seek information, guidance and support.</p> <p>4.- <i>(PS) Problem Solving</i>: Behavioral attempts to take action to deal directly with the problem.</p> |
| <p>Avoidance coping responses</p> <p>5.- <i>(CA) Cognitive Avoidance</i>: Cognitive attempts to avoid thinking realistically about a problem.</p> <p>6.- <i>(AR) Acceptance or Resignation</i>: Cognitive attempts to react to the problem by accepting it.</p> <p>7.- <i>(SR) Seeking Alternative Rewards</i>: Behavioral attempts to get involved in activities to create new sources of satisfaction.</p> <p>8.- <i>(ED) Emotional Discharge</i>: Behavioral attempts to reduce tension by expressing negative feelings.</p> |

Table 2
CP Test

| Group C | Group E |
|------------|------------|
| $M = 3.2$ | $M = 3.08$ |
| $SD = .37$ | $SD = .89$ |

Table 3
SOV Test

| Spanish Norms | Group E |
|---------------|-------------|
| $M = 51.5$ | $M = 56$ |
| $SD = 16$ | $SD = 14.3$ |

$t = 2.83$

$p \leq .01$

Table 4
CRI Test
Descriptive values and Student's *t* test

| Scales | Group C (<i>n</i> = 43) | | Group E (<i>n</i> = 31) | | | |
|--------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|----------|------------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> ≤ |
| LA | 12.27 | 3.66 | 9.06 | 3.09 | 4.36 | .01 |
| PR | 10.83 | 3.97 | 8.9 | 4.08 | 2.0 | .05 |
| SG | 9.58 | 4.01 | 8.54 | 4.35 | 1.06 | - |
| PS | 11.58 | 3.89 | 9.58 | 3.4 | 2.38 | .05 |
| CA | 8.16 | 3.33 | 9.65 | 5.15 | 1.42 | - |
| AR | 6.7 | 2.69 | 8.81 | 3.64 | 2.77 | .01 |
| SR | 7.48 | 4.21 | 10.58 | 4.05 | 3.22 | .01 |
| ED | 7 | 3.65 | 9.18 | 3.88 | 2.47 | .05 |

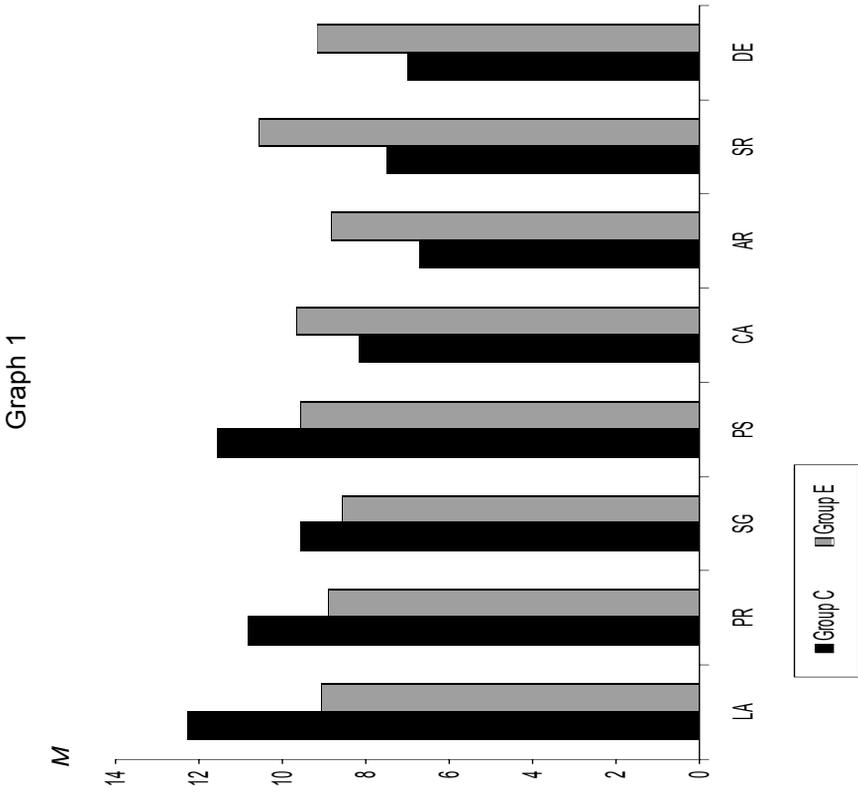
Table 5

| | SOV | LA | PR | SG | PS | CA | AR | SR | ED | CP |
|-----|------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|
| SOV | 1.00 | | | | | | | | | |
| LA | .08 | 1.00 | | | | | | | | |
| PR | .12 | .22 | 1.00 | | | | | | | |
| SG | -.01 | .24 | -.10 | 1.00 | | | | | | |
| PS | -.18 | .32 | .30 | .16 | 1.00 | | | | | |
| CA | .14 | .10 | .09 | -.14 | -.01 | 1.00 | | | | |
| AR | .28 | .17 | .00 | -.13 | -.03 | .20 | 1.00 | | | |
| SR | .34 | .05 | .41* | -.27 | .28 | .16 | .01 | 1.00 | | |
| ED | .32 | .21 | .19 | .00 | .03 | .51** | .13 | .44* | 1.00 | |
| CP | .40 | .24 | .13 | -.01 | -.05 | .19 | .18 | -.16 | .23 | 1.00 |

Note

N = 31

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$



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