Negative Emotions in Career Decision-Making

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Within the context of career counseling, clients often regard negatives feelings toward vocational options as inconsequential. Regrettably, by doing so, they discount the significance of the affect and overlook an important source of information. In the following study, Puffer and Pence investigated college students' negative emotional reactions to self- or computer reported occupations and the rationales for the selection of the negative affect. Their findings reveal how negative emotionality can be adaptive and feasibly assist career decision-makers.

Keywords: Negative Emotions ; career decision-making ; emotion accessibility and interpretation

1. Introduction

The first career interest inventory emerged in the late 1920s. The response options for the questions in the Strong Vocational Interest Blank included ‘like’ and ‘dislike.’ Both answers are emotional reactions. Regrettably, clients within the context of vocational counseling often regard negative feelings (e.g., dislikes) as inconsequential. Yet, negative emotionality can be adaptive and feasibly assist career decision-makers. Inp the literature on college students’ career development and emotional functioning, there is a paucity of information about how negative emotions advance the career decision-making process and how career decision-makers apply such knowledge.

2. Effect of Negative Emotions on Career Decision-Making

Puffer and Pence recruited a sample of undergraduates (*n* = 256) to ascertain imaginable adaptive career decision-making benefits from negative affect [1]. Employing a Mixed Methods-Grounded Theory methodology, they tabulated the negative emotional reactions of college students to vocations that were self- or computer-reported. In addition, they analyzed the students’ answers to two investigative questions about the selection of their negative emotions.

From the data, the undergraduates self-reported 6191 negative emotional reactions. Puffer and Pence discovered six reoccurring negative feelings accounting for 76% of the total affective responses. The six were blandness, anxiety, tedium, fright, tension, and fear, listed in their respective rank. To reduce the participants’ most frequently endorsed negative emotions to the fewest number of parameters while capturing the breadth of their emotive preferences, the six negative emotions were simplified into three meta-emotions (see Table 1). Borrowing from the prototype perspective of Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O’Connor, Puffer and Pence selected worry, boredom, and pressure as meta-categories [2]. Worry entailed anxiety, fright, and fear—35% of the total number of reactions. Boredom comprised of blandness and tedium encompassing 32% of the total reactions. Pressure included tension—9% of all responses.

Table 1. Descriptions of Undergraduates’ Frequent Negative Emotions and Examples of Their Usage of the Emotion (Why the Selection).

Worry	Description	Participants’ Words
Anxiety (17% of total emotional reactions)	Anxiety is a tertiary emotion to nervousness that is a secondary emotion to fear, a primary emotion [2]. Anxiety is a response to an unspecified threat. Participants discussed an adaptive effect to anxiety. It can generate caution and motivation.	*By being anxious, I can carefully consider my options; Anxious that my work wouldn’t help the person and I might make it worse; Anxiety can be positive in making sure I reflect on the career before jumping into it impulsively; Anxiety—usually results in me working harder and growing into what I am supposed to be; and It could be actually useful in pushing me.*

Fright (10% of total emotional reactions)	Fright is a tertiary emotion to horror that is a secondary emotion to fear, a primary emotion [2]. Fright is a reaction to a specific, sudden threat with an intensity that is unnerving or jarring.	*Working with criminals would make me terrified of being physically harmed; It is very frightening to have to get through to children and form them to retain the information; I would be scared/frightened to put a patient in a worse condition; and Being a bank manager would be frightening and scary.*
Fear (8% of total emotional reactions)	Fear is a primary emotion [2]. It is a reaction to a specific threat—a perceived negative experience with a career. Fear is similar to fright. The threat is uncomfortable, yet it is not jarring.	*Fear—that I would [not] be fit for the job/good enough; I think fear of failing can be a good motivator; I chose fear because I want to help people but I am always afraid I will give the wrong or bad advice; Fear can be overcome, but it should be taken into account for vocational reasons because it will help me prove my strengths/weaknesses to see if it would be a good fit*.
Boredom		
Blandness (17% of total emotional reactions	Blandness is a reaction to something dull or mediocre [3]. It is unpleasant and the opposite of interest [4]. It is an emotion of boredom. There is the desire to ignore environmental stimuli; nothing can keep a person's attention [5].	*I found this bland because the business classes I have taken seemed boring to me; I circled bland because it would be the same hard and exhausting work every day and the smell would be awful; I circled bland because I wouldn't be doing anything other than looking at finances and numbers all day and that sounds so boring and uninteresting.*
Tedium (15% of total emotional reactions)	Tedium is related to bland. Yet, the emotion also associates with perceived or actual monotonous and repetitive routine that becomes tiresome [6].	*It may help me realize why counseling is tedious to me; It would be tedious with all the paper work I would have to do; I would love being a teacher, but I sometimes think that it would become repetitive and tedious and I may begin to lose interest or find it difficult to stay motivated.*
Pressure		
Tension (9% of total emotional reactions)	Tension is a tertiary emotion to nervousness that is a secondary emotion to fear, a primary emotion [2]. Tension is also a reaction to a perceived or an actual strained relationship(s). Some refer to tension as pressure. The uncomfortable 'strain-ness' can prevent people from relaxing [7].	*There will be tension between the people and I will work in that atmosphere; Tension isn't always bad. It helps me see that I might not have a lot of negative emotions towards this job; Tension can easily build from hard work and a desire to honor God. But, it is these negatives that formulate a stronger desire within; The tension within myself helps me to think even more about what God wants me to do.*

Note: The total *Top 6* negative emotional reactions make up 76% of total reactions.

Further, the analysis of undergraduates' answers to two investigative questions generated 4407 responses and led to the discovery of four adaptive purposes for their negative affect in career decision-making. These included elimination, uncovering, prediction, and motivation; collectively, they become a four-part interpretative matrix guiding career judgments and making career decisions. First, *elimination* is an obvious and natural adaptive purpose for negative emotional reactions to a vocation. When participants reflected on occupations, certain negative affect essentially meant no interest in the careers and enveloped an immediate desire to remove it from their internal choice-list. Undergraduates stated, "I should eliminate the profession as something I'm unlikely to do;" "Not working with children;" and "Uninteresting," or "Not interested— lack of progress in individuals."

Second, in *uncovering*, participants indicated the emotional reactions to a career unearthed something they did not realize about themselves (i.e., unknown) or something they already knew (e.g., a trait, value, preference) along with exposing something they lacked such as knowledge, experience, or skills. Undergraduates wrote, “Makes me realize I want something exciting,” and “Makes me aware that I am nervous,” along with “I know little about relationships,” and “I’m not patient.”

Third, in *prediction*, the undergraduates predicted a negative experience with occupations in the future or they anticipated a poor performance in the future with the vocation. Their answers communicated these concerns; “I will be sad learning about kids’ deep issues,” “Possible burnout,” “I might be unsuccessful,” and “I may not do well.” It is unclear as to how the participants know these outcomes will occur. Possibly, they heard about these negative outcomes from past discussions or interviews with experienced workers and projected them onto themselves.

Last, in *motivation*, the college students indicated a need to do some kind of action; this meant they would have to exert some level of effort to accomplish the desired or suggested task [5]. Some of the actions included learning, exploring, conversing, volunteering, praying, practicing, and shadowing. Specifically, they stated, “Learn study skills,” “Gets me to have a conversation with one who has this career,” “Pray about the vocation.”

Theoretically speaking, two pertinent concepts in emotion-career research were unearthed in the study by Puffer and Pence: intentional accessibility and meticulous interpretation. The authors asserted affective information can be intentionally accessed and the emotional content can be meticulously interpreted for career decision-making purposes. Regarding the former concept, intentional accessibility, vocational psychology needs to move beyond awareness of emotion towards accessing affect. There is an important distinction between career decision-makers being cognizant of feelings toward certain careers and actually knowing the specific evoked emotions’ place in their judgments or decisions. Greenburg and Johnson maintained optimal functioning transpires when people weave together all known sources of information [8]. Weaving cannot proceed without intentional access to emotional data.

Concerning the latter concept, meticulous interpretation, people can carefully pursue the meanings attached to their evoked emotions because they are explicable [9]. It is a logical ‘next step’ after accessing specific emotional information. For instance, Puffer and Pence simplified the aforementioned four adaptive purposes for negative emotions, the four-part interpretative matrix, into a two-part interpretative grid.

Elimination and *prediction* characterize a *Closed Posture* toward certain careers. *Elimination* represents a heuristic-intuitive style of decision-making [10]. Students quickly and efficiently shut out the career as an option. They were not interested and were ready to jettison the career option. No attentional activity was apparently exerted [11]. In *prediction*, undergraduates still did not regard the vocation as a possibility. Yet, their decision-making style was deliberative and systematic [10]; apparently, some feature in the occupation demanded their attention. They self-assessed and anticipated poorly performing in the occupation or they looked into the future and saw an unpleasant scenario. Possibly, they saw themselves as responsible for the poor performance or the environment was responsible for creating an unpleasant working experience [5].

Uncovering and *motivation* represent an *Open Posture* toward certain occupations. These adaptive purposes represent college students being open to a career option. Yet, in *uncovering*, the negative emotions signaled something they already knew about themselves or something missing within themselves (e.g., character trait). The affect apparently directed their attention inwardly [11]. In *motivation*, the negative affect symbolized a high level of anticipated effort [5]. The undergraduates anticipated expending both mental and physical energy to enlarge their knowledge base (e.g., learn career information) or experience repertoire (e.g., volunteer somewhere or shadow someone in the workforce) [11].

Career psychology advances by offering interpretative possibilities of evoked affect relative to vocational phenomena. If emotions precede cognition, affect becomes an efficient and insightful therapeutic compass for career decision-makers, particularly with the provision of a meaning-making grid to aid interpretation [12]. Nascent interpretive frameworks for comprehending the meaning of negative affect were presented in the study by Puffer and Pence. The arrival, though, of a common interpretative grid useful for the CDM process is not yet at hand; it will require several iterations, an impetus for future studies.

3. Conclusion

In sum, “negative emotions have always been with [humans]” [12] (p. 3). Yet, they remain mysterious, uncomfortable, and difficult to understand. This dichotomous perspective, unfortunately, restricts the inclusion of negative affectivity within vocational psychology—particularly in the career decision-making process. In the study by Puffer and Pence,

undergraduates revealed their negative emotional reactions to self- or computer-generated careers and disclosed rationales for the affect. Together, these contributions add to the pursuit of “a holistic portrait of human functioning—[emotion, cognition, and behavior]—within a career development paradigm” [13] (p. 146).

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