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## CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES TO CAREER COUNSELING

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**Abstract:** *In addition to a thorough specialized training, the counselor should possess the skills to understand each individual's particular situation, to demonstrate that he has the ability to reconfigure each time the counseling process according to the needs, the characteristics and the expectations of each client. Innovation, creativity and the ability to re-think each situation represent the analytical approach, which is the commitment to identify opportunities for the client's career development in order to complete each step. Initial research reveals the complexity and relevance of career counseling from the perspective of all those involved in the process. The object of this study is the constructivist approach to career counseling, as well as the extent to which this guiding procedure is considered significant for those involved in the process. The approach we present is aimed at identifying students' perceptions of career counseling activities, as well as the importance given to the traditional or the constructivist perspective to perform specific activities. The results show that there are gender differences and study differences (differences according to high school curricula) in terms of the perception of the counseling process conducted according to the constructivist model.*

**Keywords:** *career counseling, constructivism, success, needs, expectations*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*In order to have a realistic picture, we need to clarify the concept of career.* Some consider the career as a position held on the professional level [1], others see it as a series of promotions [2], or even consider it to be the identified and practiced profession [3]. According to HR specialists [4] career is an occupation undertaken for a significant period of time in life which is associated with opportunities for progress. From this perspective, students will be *prepared* to take advantage of opportunities that arise during employment. They are in a stage which involves a change for success. Why? A career is a redefinition of their identity, along with an identification of what they think about their future professional role, as well as the identification of what they want to convey to others about themselves, about how they want to live their life. [5] Nowadays, success has become a

synonym of achieving performance above expectations. Initial success is determined by the clarity of purpose and by an effective strategy to achieve it. In order to identify the objective of their development, they must find the answer to some questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What are the things I do best? What do I expect from myself? Where do I want to arrive? What do I like? Career counselor can provide the answers to these questions, along with an essential support in career development [6], when the young people reach the next stage after the initial decision is taken. By definition, counseling is the process through which a specialist (counselor) provides support within a well-defined methodological frame [7], to another person (the client) who receives thus aid for making decisions in regard to his personal and professional life. This is a holistic approach [8] because the client is supported to clarify issues related to his lifestyle, the significance of the

concept of career, as well as the manner in which he gets involved in his own development, with a view to achieving a balance on a personal level. The ideal answer for *identifying a desired career (the one I am heading towards)* should belong entirely to the student. Often the answer is not an easily identifiable one. Constructivist counseling proposes an approach based on the students' active involvement (based on discovery and interaction) [9]. The counselor starts from the student's natural needs and interests and identifies the educational and professional path together with the student. This path is based on what the student pictures about his desires, as well as about the context in which he lives or in which he would like to live. Thus, the information provided by the counselor or obtained by the student on his own are not treated as absolute truths, but they are interpreted and used according to the recipient's needs and expectations. V. Peavey in his work *Sociodynamic Counselling*, describes the career counseling process as a general method of life planning [10]. It is an approach based on the life of the young people. This counseling model aims at: respecting the personal freedom principle (the initiative to make a decision), offering specialized support to people in order to successfully participate in social life, offering specialized support to identify a personal goal in regard to personal development. In this framework, each of the team members (the counselor and the student) has their own contribution to complete the act. The counselee is considered an expert in his own life (because it is considered that only he knows what he wants from his life and his future), and from this perspective, he is the only one to make a decision. The counselor is the expert who builds and provides a favorable context [11] for communication, so that discussions are truly useful. The sociodynamic perspective is a holistic one and it frequently resorts to common narrative and autobiographical elements seen as essential in the process of helping the beneficiary to achieve self-understanding, to recognize the relationships between the self and the environment, as well as to initiate an action plan. The sociodynamic counseling promotes respect for young people to find answers to the question - How should I live my life?, as well as respect for the effort to become socially integrated and to develop a sense of social responsibility.

Even if we share or do not share certain values, we establish membership in a particular social group. We confront our values with others when we choose our discussion partners, life partners or our work line. The constructivist approach makes the students to feel valued. All these are important elements needed in the counseling approach, but they are not enough. The young people are determined to make their own efforts in order to establish a target for his personal development and in order to identify a career plan. The counselors who project their intervention by exploiting the constructivist model provide the students with the tools of knowledge [12], such as: problem-solving exercises, exercises based on investigating reality, etc.. From this perspective, the counseling activities look into manners in which students make the most of the information they receive, conduct thinking and manage to build a vision for their personal and professional future [13]. Through this approach, we aim at capturing the students' perceptions on the specifics of the counseling process proposed and conducted by specialists in school, from both a traditional and constructivist perspective.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of research is investigating the students' perceptions on career counseling activities conducted in high schools with students in terminal grades. The overall impression [14] that students have about traditional and constructivist counseling activities (in terms of importance and frequency) was identified.

### Specific Assumptions

- a) There are significant differences between boys and girls regarding their perception on career counseling in the sense that:
  - Girls give more importance than boys to constructivist counseling;
  - Girls will appreciate that the most commonly performed activities are the constructivist ones rather than the traditional counseling ones in contrast to the boys;
- b) There are significant differences between students based on high school pathway in terms of the perception of career guidance in regards to:
  - Students from theoretical high schools will appreciate more the constructivist counseling



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in comparison with their peers from vocational or technological high schools, who give more importance to traditional counseling.

Correlational study variables:

*Dependent Variable:* students' perceptions on career counseling of in terms of the importance of constructivist/traditional counseling;

*Independent variables:*

- The subjects' gender: female, male;
- Type of education: general, vocational, technological

### 2.1 Participants

The study involved students in upper secondary education, respectively the twelfth grade and all the three types of education found in the organizational structure of secondary education were covered: theoretical, technological and vocational.

The lot includes a total of 257 participants, including:

- 130 girls;
- 127 boys;
- 194 students from urban areas;
- 63 students from rural areas (this dimension was not taken into account due to the fact that it was not a balanced group);
- 84 students studying in theoretical high schools;
- 92 students from vocational high schools;

Research was conducted in NE region and questionnaires were answered by respondents.

### 2.2. Instruments

The instrument used in research: the CCSES questionnaire (Career Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale). With its help we identified cross-individual differences on perceiving the career counseling process. The CCSES questionnaire was developed by Karen O'Brien, Lynette Heim Bikos, Mary J. Heppner, Lissa Y. Flores and published in the Journal of Counseling Psychology [15]. The initial questionnaire contained 54 activities specific to career guidance (which underlined the traditional and the constructivist approach). Respondents had

to indicate on a Likert scale with six steps the extent to which these activities took place in the counseling sessions they attended.

The questionnaire was translated and adapted to the Romanian population and was pre-tested on a group of experts. These experts were asked to read the 54 items and give their opinion on which described best the constructivist counseling. The analysis of the answers helped remove a large number of items that were considered ambiguous by experts so that, finally, we kept our questionnaire for a total of 24 activities to describe the two types of career counseling.

Examples of items specific to traditional counseling: providing information on occupations the student is interested in, applying psychological tests and questionnaires, developing new skills required when entering the labor market (writing a letter of motivation, a resume, participating in an interview for employment), etc..

Examples of items specific to the constructivist counseling: using metaphors in order to uncover the meaning, understanding metaphor, constructive questioning in order to facilitate communication, designing a plan in order to achieve the future goal, voicing out experiences and stories, etc..

Deviation from the initial questionnaire is also represented by the introduction of a new dimension, the importance given to these activities by students. The internal consistency (Alpha Cronbach) of the questionnaire is very good (0.898 on the questionnaires filled in by the students), which allowed us to provide optimal use of questionnaire validly and reliably. In processing the results we used: T tests for independent samples, One Way Anova statistical method, the Bonferoni test.

### 2.2 Results

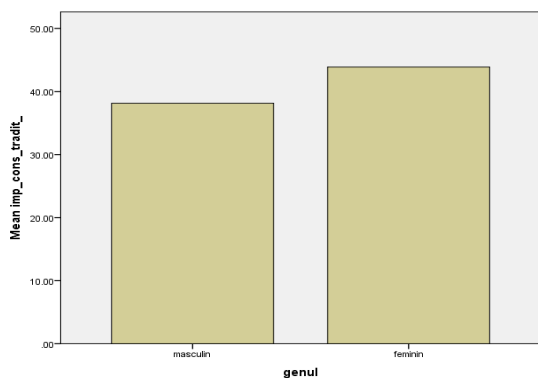
In order to check if there is an effect of the variable of the *subjects' gender* on the *students' perception on career guidance*, we used the statistical method - t tests for independent samples. The statistical analysis shows that:

a) *Perception on the importance of career counseling and the subjects' gender*

$p < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between female and male subjects in the perception of the importance of career guidance; girls got higher scores on this variable;

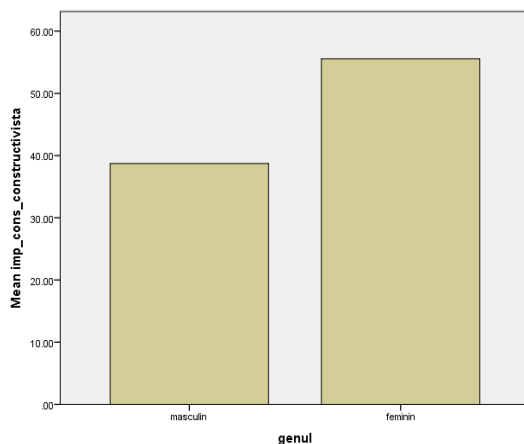
b) *Perception on traditional career counseling and the subjects' gender*

$p < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between the female and male perceptions regarding the importance given to traditional career counseling, meaning that girls have higher scores on this variable;



c) *Perception on the importance of constructivist career counseling and the subjects' gender*

$p < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between the female and male perceptions regarding the importance given to constructivist career counseling, meaning that girls have higher scores on this variable;

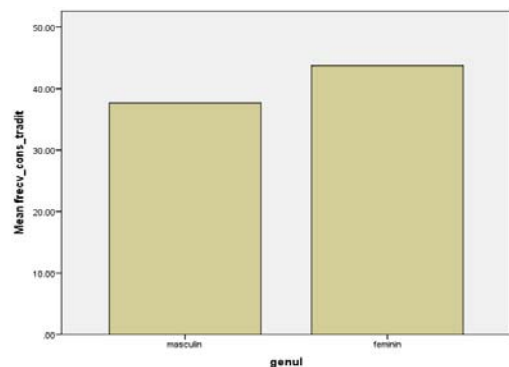


d) *Perception on the frequency of use of activities specific to career counseling and the subjects' gender*

$p > 0,05$  indicates that there is a significant difference between the female and male subjects perceptions regarding activities specific to career guidance frequency, meaning that girls have higher scores on this variable;

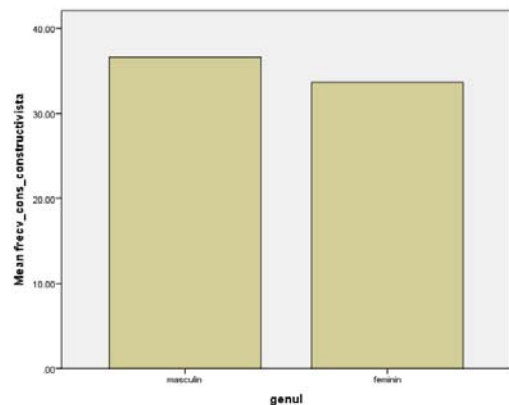
e) *Perception on the frequency of use of activities specific to traditional career counseling and the subjects' gender*

$p < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between the female and male perceptions on the frequency of activities specific to traditional career counseling, meaning that girls have higher scores on this variable;



f) *Perception on the frequency of use of activities specific to constructivist career counseling and the subjects' gender*

$p < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between the female and male perceptions on the frequency of activities specific to constructivist career counseling, meaning that boys have higher scores on this variable.



The first hypothesis is confirmed, there is a significant gender effect on the subjects' perception on the importance and frequency of career counseling activities. Girls attach increasing



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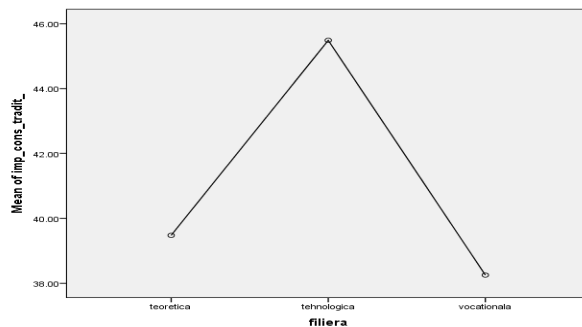
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importance to the activities performed in a constructivist manner.

In order to check if there is an effect of the variable of the type of secondary education on the variable of students' perception career counseling, we used the One Way ANOVA statistical method.

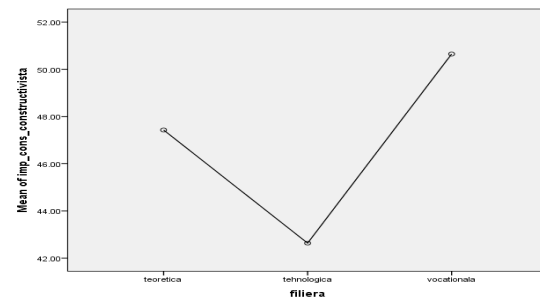
a) *Perception on the importance of traditional career counseling and type of secondary education*



The Bonferroni test indicates the following:

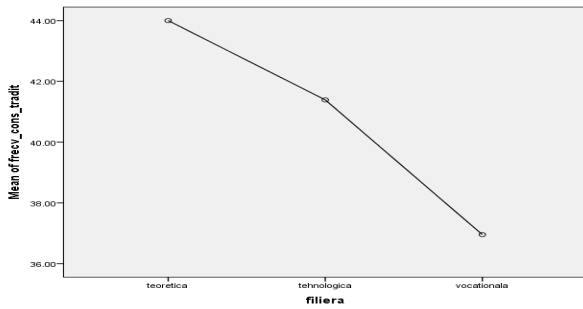
- $M1-M2 = -6.011$   $p = 0.001 < 0.001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in technological high schools, meaning that the latter attach greater importance to traditional counseling than the former;
- $M1-M3 = 1.223$   $p = 1.000 > 0.05$  indicates that there is no significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in vocational high schools with regard to the importance attached to traditional career counseling;
- $M2-M3 = 7.235$   $p = 0.001 < 0.05$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in technological high schools and students who study in vocational high schools, meaning that the former attach greater importance to constructivist counseling than the latter;

b) *Perception on the importance of constructivist career counseling and type of secondary education*



After analyzing the results, we conclude that:

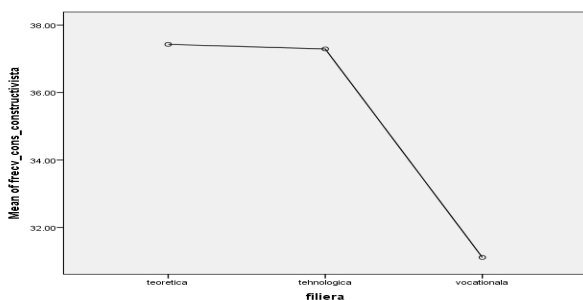
- $M1-M2 = 4.794$   $p = 0.023 < 0.001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in technological high schools, meaning that the former attach greater importance to constructivist counseling than the latter;
  - $M1-M3 = -3.219$   $p = 0.198 > 0.05$  indicates that there is no significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in vocational high schools with regard to the importance attached to traditional career counseling;
  - $M2-M3 = -8.014$   $p = 0.000 < 0.001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in technological high schools and students who study in vocational high schools, meaning that the latter attach greater importance to constructivist counseling than the former;
- c) *Perception on the frequency of the traditional career counseling and type of secondary education*



These results indicate that there is a significant relationship between the two variables as follows.

- $M1-M2 = 2.609$   $p = 0,131 > 0,05$  indicates that there is no significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in technological high schools in terms of perception on the frequency of traditional career counseling activities;
- $M1-M3 = 7.043$   $p = 0,000 < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in vocational high schools in terms of perception on the frequency of traditional career counseling activities, the former appreciating them as being often used by their counselor in class;
- $M2-M3 = 4.434$   $p = 0,002 < 0,05$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in technological high schools and students who study in vocational high schools, meaning that the former consider that constructivist career counseling activities are much more frequent in their class than the latter;

d) *Perception on the frequency of the traditional career counseling activities and type of secondary education*



These results indicate that there is a significant relationship between the two variables. Thus:

- $M1-M2 = 0.135$   $p = 1.000 > 0,05$  indicates that there is no significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in technological high schools in terms of perception on the frequency of constructivist career counseling activities;
- $M1-M3 = 6.318$   $p = 0,000 < 0,001$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in theoretical high schools and students who study in vocational high schools in terms of perception on the frequency of constructivist career counseling activities, the former appreciating them as being often used by their counselor in class;
- $M2-M3 = 6.182$   $p = 0,000 < 0,05$  indicates that there is a significant difference between students who study in technological high schools and students who study in vocational high schools, meaning that the former consider that constructivist career counseling activities are much more frequent in their class than the latter;

The second hypothesis was confirmed, therefore there is an effect of the independent variable of the type of secondary education on the students' perception of the importance and frequency of career counseling.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

We conducted an analysis of how students perceive the importance and frequency of performing career counseling activities in high school from both a traditional perspective and the constructivist model. Statistical data confirmed initial assumptions. Thus, *biological gender* statistically demonstrated its effect on students' perception on career counseling, girls considering both traditional and constructivist career counseling activities more important than boys did. Another determinant of the perception on career counseling is *the type of education* variable. Related to this hypothesis, it is very important to pinpoint the fact that all three experimental groups achieved high scores on *the importance of career counseling* variable, but if we differentiate on a cross-individual level according to preferences and needs, we can assess that students who study in technological high schools appreciate traditional career counseling activities more than their peers from theoretical high schools who consider the



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constructivist counseling as being more useful. This may also be a result of their initial orientation, given the fact that the technological and vocational types of education allow students to obtain a professional qualification. The open-mindedness specific to the students from theoretical high schools towards the counseling activities designed according to constructivist model is also supported by their needs to identify career paths they want to follow, since their initial orientation is rather general.

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