

Dependable Strengths Seminar

Vocational psychology and positive psychology are hallmarks of the field of counseling psychology (Gelso & Fretz, 2001), yet few psychologists have examined the link between these two important subfields. This paper reports on the preliminary longitudinal psychometric evidence of a vocational intervention rooted in positive psychology.

DEPENDABLE STRENGTHS – OVERVIEW

- Dependable Strengths (DS) is a planned sequence of experiences in which participants identify their strengths and talents, uncover hidden potential, and become motivated to strive for success
- The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) was created by Bernard Haldane in the 1940s as a way to help military personnel transition their skills to civilian life
- The DSAP includes a variety of activities: individual seat work, didactic presentations, large group discussion, small group processing, demonstrations, role-plays, homework, and a follow-up session
- The seminar covers topics such as: good experiences, strengths identification, job magnet interviews, field work, traditional job interviews, job security, portfolios, and goal-setting
- The DSAP has been used successfully with university students, K-12 students, welfare recipients, church groups, prisoners, retirees, work teams, and more groups in the USA, South Africa, & China
- Empirical research has linked the DSAP with positive outcomes related to self (Forster, 1991)
- The University of Washington has served 500+ alumni during 2.5 day DS workshops since 1996
- Shortened versions of the workshop are offered in undergraduate academic departments
- Aspects of the DSAP are incorporated into other job search workshops and handouts, as well as a 3-credit course called Navigating Career Options

PURPOSE

- The University of Washington adapted the DSAP for use with graduate students to help them:
 - Have a safe place to explore career issues because many grad students feel pressure from mentors to pursue tenure-track positions at research universities
 - Realize they are normal; that many grad students question their career paths
 - Take time to explore their positive experiences and qualities, since some grad students are belittled in their departments or feel inadequate compared to their professors
 - Learn about career paths outside academia

ADAPTATIONS

- The graduate student version of the seminar, as compared to the traditional seminar:
 - Is 2 days instead of 2.5 days
 - Includes more self and career exploration components
 - Includes fewer job search components
 - Does not include field work

LOGISTICS

- The graduate student adaptation was created in 1998 and four workshops serving 55 grad students were held over a two year period
- The workshops began again in March 2005 as a result of campus-wide renewed energy for graduate student career programming
- The workshops are held quarterly – on Friday of finals week and Monday of break week
- Eleven workshops have been held over the past 3 years
- Group size is usually limited to 12

PARTICIPANTS

- 122 individuals have completed the workshop since March 2005
- Gender – 21 males and 101 females
- Academic level – 44 master’s students, 72 doctoral students, 3 post-docs, and 3 alumni
- Academic programs – over 60 academic departments have been represented. Participants come from graduate and professional programs in the humanities, social sciences, biological and physical sciences, public health, engineering, education, business, etc.

EVALUATION FORMS

- Time 1 – Participants complete a brief paper evaluation at the conclusion of the workshop
 - Twelve Likert questions ask how the workshop helped them with various concerns
 - Very Much, Quite a Bit, A Little, Not at All, Unsure
 - One open-ended question
 - The most important thing I learned in this workshop is....
 - Four demographic questions
- Time 2 & 3 – Participants are asked to complete an electronic survey 3 and 12 months after the workshop
 - Same Likert and demographic questions as Time 1
 - One additional open-ended question
 - In what ways has the DS workshop affected your life in the months since you participated in the workshop?
- Data reported for 3 workshops – June 2006, August 2006, December 2006
 - 31 respondents at Time 1
 - 21 respondents at Time 2
 - 16 respondents at Time 3
- Percent of participants who indicated the workshop helped them “Very Much” or “Quite a Bit” with various issues are reported

PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS – TIME 1

- The DS workshop....
 - Helped me remember my accomplishments – 100%
 - Helped me realize the importance of knowing & articulating my strengths during career planning – 100%

- Provided a safe place to consider different career paths – 90%
- Helped me realize it's okay to have questions about my career – 84%
- Augmented my ability to find work that is right for me – 77%
- Confirmed my ideas about my strengths – 77%
- Increased my level of optimism about my career potential – 74%
- Broadened my ideas about making career contacts – 68%
- Revealed strengths I had overlooked – 68%
- Raised my self-confidence – 65%
- Helped me better understand which kinds of careers are likely to fit me well – 45%
- Brought out new ideas of careers I might want to explore – 29%

PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS – TIME 2

- The DS workshop....
 - Helped me remember my accomplishments – 90%
 - Helped me realize importance of knowing/articulating my strengths during career planning – 90%
 - Increased my level of optimism about my career potential – 81%
 - Raised my self-confidence – 81%
 - Confirmed my ideas about my strengths – 81%
 - Revealed strengths I had overlooked – 76%
 - Provided a safe place to consider different career paths – 76%
 - Helped me realize it's okay to have questions about my career – 67%
 - Broadened my ideas about making career contacts – 57%
 - Augmented my ability to find work that is right for me – 57%
 - Helped me better understand which kinds of careers are likely to fit me well – 57%
 - Brought out new ideas of careers I might want to explore – 29%

PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS – TIME 3

- The DS workshop....
 - Helped me remember my accomplishments – 94%
 - Helped me realize it's okay to have questions about my career – 94%
 - Helped me realize importance of knowing/articulating my strengths during career planning – 81%
 - Confirmed my ideas about my strengths – 69%
 - Broadened my ideas about making career contacts – 69%
 - Raised my self-confidence – 63%
 - Provided a safe place to consider different career paths – 63%
 - Augmented my ability to find work that is right for me – 56%
 - Revealed strengths I had overlooked – 56%
 - Increased my level of optimism about my career potential – 50%
 - Helped me better understand which kinds of careers are likely to fit me well – 25%
 - Brought out new ideas of careers I might want to explore – 44%

DIFFERENCES

- Total percentage of questions marked “Very Much” or “Quite a Bit”
 - Time 1 – 73%
 - Time 2 – 70%
 - Time 3 – 64%

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS – TIME 1

- The most important thing I learned in this workshop is:
 - “How to reframe my sets of skills and experiences into language that better reflects my true innate talents, which will help me find the right career path for me.”
 - “To focus on my strengths that I like not just what I am good at or have done in the past.”
 - “It’s okay to be unsure of where I’m going in the future, but it’s important that I always keep strengths in mind.”
 - “I don’t have to just stay with what I’m doing now because others want me to.”

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS – TIME 2

- What is the most important thing you learned in the DS workshop?
 - “That there are things that I’m good at! Graduate school has definitely taken a toll on my self-confidence, and it was really good for me to identify my strengths and have others cheer me on.”
- In what ways has the DS workshop affected your life in the months since you participated in the workshop? (summary of responses)
 - Re-clarify my goals
 - Renegotiate my fellowship to be more in line with my strengths
 - Talk with advisors more openly about career issues
 - Establish and maintain better boundaries; manage my choice of activities
 - Improve interviewing and networking skills

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS – TIME 3

- What is the most important thing you learned in the DS workshop?
 - “It’s okay - important - to really focus on finding a suitable career fit. The input and feedback from other participants was critical in identifying certain strengths that I took for granted.”
- In what ways has the DS workshop affected your life in the months since you participated in the workshop?
 - “I researched a variety of career paths, and though I ended up in the original path, I felt that it was because it was the right choice for me. No regrets about my choices.”
 - “The DS workshop showed me that using my strengths can exponentially improve my day-to-day happiness and satisfaction and fulfillment in life.”
 - “For many years I’ve struggled with depression, and the DS workshop helped clarify that one of the main sources of my depression is my current career! It utilizes very few of my strengths, which I never realized prior to DS. DS energized me to aspire to something that makes me feel more satisfaction.”

NEXT STEPS

- Pair individual participants' scores at Time 1 with their scores at Time 2 and Time 3, and run more sophisticated statistical procedures with the data
- Use standardized outcome measures
- Analyze data according to gender, academic level, and academic discipline

RESOURCES & REFERENCES

- Center for Dependable Strengths
 - <http://www.dependablestrengths.org/>
- Graduate Student Dependable Strengths seminar information
 - <http://careers.washington.edu/gradstudents/dependablestrengthsforgradstudents>
- Special journal issue on the influence of Bernard Haldane
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- Forster, J. R. (1991). Facilitating positive changes in self-constructions. *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology*, 4, 281-292.
- Gelso, C. J., & Fretz, B. R. (2001). *Counseling psychology* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers.
- Lopez, S. J., Magyar-Moe, J. L., Petersen, S. E., Ryder, J. A., Krieshok, T. S., O'Byrne, K. K., Lichtenberg, J. W., & Fry, N. A. (2006). Counseling psychology's focus on positive aspects of human functioning. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 34, 205-227.

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