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# Strengths-Based Career Counseling: Overview and Initial Evaluation

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## Abstract

This study implemented an innovative model of individual Strengths-Based Career Counseling (SBCC), as carried out by vocational counseling psychologists, and measured its impact on unemployed job seekers. As part of a quasi-randomized pre–post intervention study, career counseling clients completed *self-esteem*, *career exploration*, *strengths use*, and *life satisfaction* scales prior to the initial counseling session (T1) and immediately following the final session (T2). A follow-up was carried out at 3 months postcounseling (T3). At baseline, the SBCC sample ( $N = 31$ ) and the conventional career counseling sample ( $N = 30$ ) were statistically similar on the measured variables. As hypothesized, at postcounseling, only the SBCC sample demonstrated enhanced *self-esteem*. Both the client samples reported enhanced *daily use of strengths* and unchanged *career exploration* and *life satisfaction*. However, precounseling *strengths use* predicted enhanced postcounseling *self-esteem* only among the SBCC clients. At the 3-month follow-up, the strengths-based sample assigned a higher rating to the counseling contribution and reported a higher rate of employment (80.6%) than did the comparison group (60%). Implications for career counseling with unemployed clients were discussed.

## Keywords

strengths-based career counseling, self-esteem, career exploration, life satisfaction, job seekers

## Introduction

Today's world of work is characterized by a loss of the traditional sense of vocational security and the emergence of an uncertain and extremely competitive labor market (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2012). People who have lost their jobs not only need to seek reemployment under these challenging conditions but must also cope with the emotional roller coaster of unemployment (Borgen & Amundson, 1987), resulting in a higher incidence of psychological and physical

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problems compared to employed individuals (for a meta-analysis, see McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005).

Career counselors have the opportunity to assist clients in making substantial and sustainable changes in their lives (Whiston, 2003), and indeed, several meta-analyses have shown that career interventions are effective (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998), with individual career counseling found to be the most effective intervention (Whiston, 2003). However, only a few studies (e.g., Bernaud, Gaudron, & Lemoine, 2006) have investigated the impact of individual career counseling on unemployed adults.

Identifying personal strengths and resources, as well as helping the client in planning and managing a more complete and a better life, has been the focus of career counseling since its foundation (Jones, 1994). Career counseling is currently at a place where it can, and should, develop and implement knowledge and tools from the field of positive psychology, rather than limiting itself to assessing interests, work values, and skills (Robitschek & Woodson, 2006). In this study, we investigated the effectiveness of strengths-based career counseling (SBCC)<sup>1</sup> on a job-seeking clientele.

We decided to develop an SBCC regimen, based on the character strengths model of positive psychology, in light of recent studies that have demonstrated that daily implementation of personal (signature) strengths enhances self-esteem, achievement of personal goals, and general life satisfaction (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011). These are variables found to be relatively low among unemployed job seekers (for reviews, see Feather, 1990; Warr, 1987; Winefield, 1995).

### *Strengths-Based Counseling*

Strengths-based counseling, having originated in positive psychology, aims to explore and promote optimal human functioning in the full array of life domains through daily deployment of character strengths (Seligman, 1998). Strengths-based counseling provides counseling psychologists with a new language of strengths and positive human qualities that often go unrecognized, unnamed, and unacknowledged in therapeutic settings (Smith, 2006).

A consensus among researchers maintains that strengths are what a person can do and is able to be; strengths have moral value and are acquired and developed dynamically; and most people are characterized by specific strengths (McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A definition of character strengths has been offered by McCullough and Snyder (2000): “a psychological process through which a person is made to think that a particular act which he does is beneficial both to him and to society” (p. 3).

The “Values in Action” (VIA) and the “Values in Action Inventory of Strengths” (VIA-IS), developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), are the most commonly used strengths classification models and measurement tools. Several strengths-based counseling and psychotherapy interventions have been developed based on these questionnaires and their classification scheme (see comprehensive summary by Lopez & Edwards, 2006). In one example, strengths-centered therapy (Wong, 2006a) comprises four stages carried out over the course of several months: (a) identifying client strengths; (b) building a vision whereby goals are identified and are to be implemented through these strengths; (c) practicing using these strengths and seeing their benefit; and (d) celebrating achievements, identifying areas of future development, and identifying available resources for coping with future challenges. Strengths-based counseling (SBC; Smith, 2006) for adolescents is a second example of a strengths-based counseling approach, whose main elements include establishing a therapeutic alliance, identifying strengths through narrative techniques, clarifying client concerns, instilling hope, framing solutions through solution-focused strategies, empowerment and building resilience to pursue goals, evaluating progress, and closing.

Although detailed manual-based protocols for strengths-based personal counseling and psychotherapy are currently available, we are not aware of any such protocol in the field of career and employment counseling. Furthermore, although specific strengths-based techniques have been supported empirically (Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), the effectiveness of a comprehensive SBCC intervention has yet to be examined, despite the upsurge in the use of these types of interventions in therapy and counseling processes (Linley, 2008). The present study sought to develop and empirically test SBCC.

## The Present Study: Developing and Preliminary Testing of an SBCC Model

In individual career counseling research, there are few examples of treatment protocols, and often the treatment descriptions are vague (Swanson, 1995; Whiston, 2003). Hence, practitioners may be impressed by reports of positive outcomes of individual career counseling but have very little information on what elements should be included in their career counseling practice (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999). In the first stage of the present study, a detailed protocol was developed by the authors for counselors' use. The counseling protocol details the SBCC process comprised of 4-hour long counseling sessions. The protocol was pilot tested with 12 career clients and 6 student counselors as part of a graduate course led by the first author. In the present study, we tested the effectiveness of the SBCC process in comparison with conventional career counseling with an unemployed job-seeking clientele.

In selecting our outcome measures, we adopted long-term behavioral outcome variables (including employment status) in addition to self-report measures as recommended by Folsom and Reardon (2003) and by Brown and Ryan Krane (2000). In the present study, we conducted a 3-month follow-up, since the process of reentering the job market typically extends beyond the period of counseling.

In addition to common measures used in vocational psychology research (Whiston & Rahardja, 2006), the current SBCC study incorporated key measures drawn from positive psychology and adopted primarily from the SBC literature. Among these, *life satisfaction* and *self-esteem* variables are common to vocational psychology research as well. Since *life satisfaction* is important for life experience in general and for work experience in particular (Diener, 1984; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), vocational psychology researchers encourage its inclusion as an outcome measure in studies of career counseling processes (Whiston & Rahardja, 2006) and especially among the unemployed (e.g., Winefield, Winefield, Tiggeman, & Goldney, 1991). *Self-esteem* was also found as relevant to vocational psychology research, and indeed, Bernaud, Gaudron, and Lemoine (2006) found elevated self-esteem in job-seeking clients following a career counseling process. We also measured *career exploration* that plays an important role in choosing and planning a career as well as in career adaptation processes (Taveira & Moreno, 2003). Thus, in this study, we investigated the impact of SBCC on job-seekers' *self-esteem*, *career exploration*, *strengths use*, and *life satisfaction*. We expected these outcomes to be enhanced among SBCC participants. Consequently, we formulated the following hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1 (regarding differences between pre- and postcounseling, T1-T2):** Participants in the SBCC intervention would manifest increased levels of strengths use, self-esteem, career exploration, and life satisfaction, compared with participants in the comparison group.

**Hypothesis 2 (regarding postcounseling, T2):** Participants in the SBCC intervention would report (a) greater progress in *achieving personal goals* and (b) higher levels of *satisfaction from the counseling*, compared to participants in the comparison group.

**Hypothesis 3 (regarding a 3-month follow-up following the conclusion of counseling, T3):** Participants in the SBCC intervention, compared with participants in the comparison group,

would report (a) a greater *contribution of the counseling* and (b) higher rate of employment (or enrollment in a vocational training course).

Finally, in order to broaden our understanding of the effects of our SBCC intervention, we investigated participants' responses to two open questions following the final (fourth) counseling session (T2) and at the 3-month follow-up (T3). The T2 and T3 questions were identical and requested participants to share any additional relevant comment they may have regarding the counseling process. Participants' responses were then subjected to a content analysis in order to identify common themes.

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

**Clients.** All clients were unemployed job seekers who were referred to career and employment counseling at 1 of the 11 employment offices from all regions of the Israel National Employment Service (INES) by placement counselors during the years 2011–2012. Inclusion criteria in this study for the referred clients was completing a minimum of 12 years of schooling, achieving at least partial high school matriculation and accessing Internet and e-mail. Reasons for referral to career counseling were varied: unproductive job search over an extended period of time; need to identify alternative career paths with a more promising placement potential; assessing potential for vocational retraining; and in general, providing recommendations to the placement counselor regarding realistic placement alternatives for the short and medium terms. One key outcome target for most clients referred to counseling at the INES was successful reemployment. A total of 124 referred clients completed the consent form, of which a total of 61 remained in the study (31 in the study group and 30 in the comparison group) through its conclusion, and for whom complete data are available. The shortfall was comprised of 19 who chose not to actualize their referral, 27 who failed to complete the precounseling questionnaire, and 17 who dropped out at various stages of the study. Among the dropouts, two study group clients found employment following the initial counseling session and discontinued counseling, and five study group clients were discontinued by the vocational psychologists immediately after the first session/beginning of the second session. Three were discontinued, because they appeared at the second session after a hiatus of a month or more and neglected to complete the VIA-IS questionnaire, one because of low intellectual potential spotted by the counselor as hampering the counseling in a method involving an unfamiliar domain of content and terminology, and one was discontinued following the introduction of severe personal content, which, in the counselor's view, was incompatible with the career counseling process. Two comparison group clients elected to discontinue their participation in the study due to their dissatisfaction with the counseling process. Eight additional clients (three in the study group and five in the comparison group) were eliminated upon not completing both the T2 and the T3 questionnaires.

All recorded demographic characteristics were found equivalent for both the counseling groups. The SBCC group was comprised of 16 (51.6%) female and 15 (48.4%) male clients, ranging in age from 24 to 52 ( $M = 38.2$ , standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 7.95) years, with an education level ranging from 12 to 21 years ( $M = 14.1$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ). Marital status was single (45.2%), married (41.9%), or divorced (12.9%). The comparison group was comprised of 19 (63.3%) female and 11 (36.7%) male clients, ranging in age from 21 to 55 years ( $M = 36.6$ ,  $SD = 7.81$ ), with an education level ranging from 12 to 18 years ( $M = 13.4$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ). Marital status was single (33.3%), married (53.3%), divorced (6.7%), or widowed (6.7%). The vast majority (over 90%) of both the groups reported no prior experience with counseling or psychotherapy.

**Counselors.** Counselors were 15 licensed psychologists, all holding at least a master's degree in psychology, with demonstrated experience in individual career counseling. These counselors ranged

in age from 35 to 65 years ( $M = 48.4$ ,  $SD = 10.1$ ), and their professional experience ranged from 3 to 30 years ( $M = 14.4$ ,  $SD = 9.2$ ). Seven counselors (all women) counseled SBCC clients, and eight counselors (5 women and 3 men) counseled comparison group clients. There was no overlap among the counselors between the two groups. The number of clients for each counselor ranged from 2 to 8 in the SBCC group and 2 to 10 in the comparison group.

It should be noted that the two counseling psychologist groups did not differ with respect to the extent of their career counseling experience and professional credentials nor was there any indication of variable professional competency levels among these counselors prior to the beginning of the study.

## Measures

**Demographic Characteristics.** Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, requesting information regarding age, gender, marital status, number of children, level of education, employment history, and prior personal experience with counseling/psychotherapy.

**Strengths Use.** *Strengths Use* was assessed by the Strengths Use scale (SUS; Govindji & Linley, 2007). Fourteen items inquire about the extent to which their strengths are used, rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Items were developed from a review of the positive psychology literature, with initial psychometrics supporting a one-factor structure, showing good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), and positive correlations with well-being and other positive psychology constructs (Wood et al., 2011). The scale was translated into Hebrew for this study. We also found the translated scale to have good reliability in the current study, with the precounseling  $\alpha$  being .88 and the postcounseling  $\alpha$  being .92. For this study, Item 7 (*My work gives me lots of opportunities to use my strengths*) was replaced with *Job seeking gives me lots of opportunities to use my strengths* in order to match the common element of the study population.

**Self-Esteem.** *Self-esteem* was assessed using the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem scale (RSES). Five positive items (e.g., *I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others*) and 5 negative items (e.g., *At times I think I am no good at all*) assess global self-esteem. Items are rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. The internal consistency reliability estimates reported range from .91 to .96 (Rosenberg, 1965). RSE was also reliable in the present study's Hebrew version: In the pre-counseling, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .78, and in the postcounseling, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .79.

**Career Exploration.** *Career exploration* (CE) was assessed with the Littman-Ovadia (2008) CE scale. The questionnaire was developed to assess both external (e.g., *I collect information about organizations and jobs*) and internal CE (e.g., *I think about my vocational goals*), as reflected in clients' current behaviors outside the sessions. It includes 15 items rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very rare*) to 5 (*very often*). The total CE score is calculated as the mean score for all items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of career exploration. Littman-Ovadia (2008) found the CE to have good reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86, .87$ ), and high convergent validity ( $r = .72$  between counselors' judgments and clients' CE scores). In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .89 and .92 at precounseling and postcounseling, respectively.

**Life Satisfaction.** *Life satisfaction* was assessed with the Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The questionnaire was developed to assess respondents' global level of satisfaction. It includes items such as *In most ways my life is close to my ideal*. Participants responded to these items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7

(*strongly agree*). Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) found the SWLS to have good reliability and validity. In the present study, the *C*αs were .84 and .78, at precounseling and postcounseling, respectively.

**Progress in Achieving Personal Goals.** To assess the progress that participants were making in achieving their personal goals, they were asked after the final session (T2) *How would you rate your progress in achieving your personal goals (since the beginning of the counseling)?* This single-item measure was scored on Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 7 (*very high*).

**Counseling Satisfaction.** To assess the *satisfaction with the counseling*, participants were asked after the last counseling session (T2) *How would you rate your satisfaction with the counseling?* This single-item measure was scored on Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 7 (*very high*).

**Counseling Contribution.** To assess the contribution of the counseling, participants were asked 3 months after the end of the counseling (T3), *How would you rate your counseling experience as contributing to the enhancement of your employment/educational status?* This single-item measure was scored on Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 7 (*very high*).

**Employment/Training Status.** To assess employment/training status participants were asked at the 3-month follow-up (T3): “Did you find a job and have begun (or soon begin) working, or have you selected a course of study or training and have begun (or soon begin) your studies?” Participants responded “Yes” or “No” to this question.

### **Description of the SBCC Intervention**

The SBCC process is based on Wong’s strength-centered therapy model (Wong, 2006a) that offers specific techniques for enhancing strengths as well as incorporating counseling elements recommended by Wong (2006b) and Lopez and Kerr (2006). Other components of the SBCC model were patterned after Smith’s (2006) SBC model and Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005). This integration was carried out in order to produce a rich, precise, and detailed model for a career adaptation of psychotherapy-oriented, strengths-based precedents.

The SBCC process is comprised of four counseling sessions during which clients undergo a process of recognizing and using their strengths in order to achieve their career-related goals. Using specific techniques and assignments enable clients to implement their strengths in sessions and between the sessions.

**First Session.** This session includes a short intake interview, gathering information about the clients’ prior experiences at work, education, and training. The counselor then assists the clients to express their employment-related counseling goals in clear, positive, and reachable terms. For example, for clients seeking reemployment, the counselor can explore with them what type of job they are pursuing and what is important for them in that job. In the next stage, the counselor assists the clients to identify at least three prominent strengths. For this process, clients are asked to examine the roles they play in their life (parent/student/neighbor) and the competencies used to execute these roles. In this dialogue, the counselor helps to draw conclusions while reflecting the clients’ own words (as they relate to their personal and employment background). The counselor then applies several specific techniques, such as *polyvocality*, in which the clients use their interpersonal and social resources to expand the number of voices bearing on their experiences (e.g., “if your best friend were here, what would he mention as your greatest strengths?”) and *Reframing*, in which clients examine an adversely viewed life experience and are encouraged to take a fresh look, formulating

the experience as having positive, functional, or useful elements. At the end of the first session, clients are requested to complete the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) at home by Internet, as a prerequisite for resuming the counseling process.

**Second Session.** In this session, clients expand the recognition of their strengths, based on the VIA classification and, after defining their goals, the counseling process advances to the stage of linking the strengths to the achievement of personal and employment goals. Counselor and client discuss the contribution of strengths to the client's life, while focusing on employment and on the ways in which the client might apply the strengths in order to make progress and to achieve previously expressed goals (e.g., if the expressed goal is to identify suitable areas of employment, the question might be, "to which employment roles/jobs can your abilities and strengths be applied?"). In the next stage, they move on to identify and form suitable solutions. At this stage, the counselor assists clients in identifying and assessing past and current expression of these goals using the *Exception question technique*, in which the counselor actively explores exceptions to the identified problem's occurrence and enlists clients' help in identifying practical solutions to presenting issues. For example, "what has worked for you, even for a short time? Can you recall a time when you achieved your goal?" This exposure will enable clients to more easily imagine these exceptions and find new ways to bolster hope and achieve goals by broadening the occurrence of exceptions. Toward the end of the session, clients receive two intersession assignments for the week. Clients are asked (1) to apply the top-ranked three to five strengths to the job search at least 3 times during the coming week; (2) to report three job search-related activities successfully performed that week and to identify the top-ranked strengths contributing to those successes (e.g., I applied my *curiosity* strength in order to gather information about areas that interest me and that I would perhaps like to learn. I used my *perseverance* strength while going over the entire Internet "wanted" boards in the area I am interested. I applied my *courage, hope, and social intelligence strengths* while going to a work place in the area of my interest and introduced myself.).

**Third Session.** The session begins with reviewing the tasks assigned at the previous session and discussing clients' progress. The counselor uses a *Metaphorical sign-posting technique*, in which clients are asked to choose an image that denotes different gradations of character growth (for instance, various rooms in a house or various gears of a manual-transmission car). This technique is intended to enable the counselor and client to identify the perceived ingredients of growth (e.g., "What precipitated the change from second to third gear?"). Although reinforcing what has already been accomplished, they move on to identify the strengths that clients would like to develop for the future. Here, the counselor uses a *Sentence completion technique*—clients complete the following sentence, "I am more likely to achieve my goal of (client's expressed goal) if I am a(an) \_\_\_\_\_ person." Clients are encouraged to think of as many words as possible to insert in the blank space in the sentence. Many of the words that clients bring to mind are likely to be character strengths. To increase clients' motivation and hope to apply the desired strengths, the counselor develops the discussion about desired strengths and their meaning for the clients. The counselor emphasizes the relationship between developing strengths and achieving personal and employment goals and asks clients' to describe what a day in their life looks like as a person owning the desired strengths. In addition, the counselor elicits from the clients who may help them develop the developing strengths and who can offer emotional support during the process. Toward the end of the session, clients receive two intersession assignments for the week. Clients are asked (1) to apply the targeted strengths to the job search at least three times during the coming week and (2) to report three job search-related activities successfully performed that week and to identify the strengths contributing to those successes.

*Fourth Session.* The session begins with a review of the assignments. At this stage, the counselor again uses a *Metaphorical sign-posting technique* in order to enable clients to reflect on their progress in developing the desired strengths. In this concluding session, counselor and client formulate and celebrate achievements in counseling and in developing strengths. The counselor and client identify what significant changes were experienced during the process of strengths development. The counselor determines with the clients how to apply available personal resources, so that they will be able to cope with future challenges. The counselor will reinforce the development of strengths, identify areas needing further work, and find out what the client's life will look like after 6 months, while persisting in developing their strengths.

At this summarizing stage, the counselor emphasizes the importance of developing and empowering the strengths. This is presented as an unceasing process that continues beyond counseling.

### *Comparison Group*

Clients in the career counseling comparison group were seen by counselors who were free to conduct their counseling within conventional guidelines which allows for a nonuniform, eclectic career counseling approach, undisturbed by research contingencies. The modal counseling approach in the comparison group can be characterized as being of a trait-factor orientation. This counseling regimen averaged four meetings, with one of the meetings typically devoted to comprehensive computerized vocational testing including ability assessment, vocational interests, and a closed personality questionnaire. No noncounseling or waiting list comparison group was included in the current study.

### *Design and Follow-Up*

The INES employs a total of 23 freelance counseling psychologists, all of whose work is routinely monitored by INES district psychologists and a national psychologist. For instance, brief ongoing consultations regarding clients are initiated by both the freelance psychologists and the relevant district psychologist, independent of any role they may or may not play in the current study. Seven of these freelance psychologists responded positively to a request to participate in SBCC training and to carry out their counseling according to the SBCC protocols. These counselors participated in a training day, received a comprehensive manual with all relevant theoretical and practical material, and received periodic phone and e-mail monitoring and guidance by the trainer over the course of the study.<sup>2</sup> Among the remaining 16 counselors, 8 received clients from the comparison group, based on the accessibility of data collection from certain branch offices. In a quasi-blind condition, these comparison group psychologists were informed that some of their clients would be assigned to the comparison group and that they were to proceed to conduct their counseling process as usual, with no adjustments related to the study; they were not informed for which of their clients' measurements were to be collected. The comparison group clients were not apprised of the SBCC option, with their alternatives being to receive the conventional counseling with or without completing any study-related forms or questionnaires.

Placement counselors who had been oriented to the research project by the research team invited the referred job seekers to participate in the study. All clients agreeing to participate in the study completed a consent form and supplied basic personal data (first name, e-mail address, and cellular phone number) to enable the forwarding of questionnaires by e-mail. The participants, as well as the placement counselors and psychologists, were notified about the study's goal as formulated in the subjects' consent form. The study goal was defined as "... examining the effectiveness of career counseling processes in order to improve this service and to contribute to the current knowledge." In addition, in order to prevent bias in the study, we formulated an instruction form for the placement counselor regarding the appropriate way to request the participation of the clients. The form included all the

necessary information the placement counselor was required to provide the clients as to their participation in the study (research requirements, possibility of discontinuing participation with no penalty, confidentiality of information supplied, and other relevant details).

In the large Tel Aviv and Jerusalem branch offices, which are staffed by several psychologists, both conditions were available for client referral. This situation allowed subjects meeting technical inclusion criteria ( $N = 19$ ) to be randomly assigned to one of the two research groups. In the nine other smaller employment office branches, where only one psychologist served, the local employment counselor referred clients to the local psychologist who may or may not have been SBCC trained. These clients were thereby assigned to the study group or to the comparison group by the research team, according to the classification of the psychologist.

The participants of the two groups were requested to complete the questionnaires at three time intervals: T1, prior to the initial counseling session—Demographics questionnaire, RSE, CE, SUS, and SWLS; T2, upon completion of the final counseling session—RSE, CE, SUS and SWLS, two closed questions regarding *progress in achieving personal goals* and *satisfaction with counseling*, and one open question requesting any further comment about the counseling process (“Would you like to comment about anything regarding the counseling?”); and T3, 3 months following the final counseling session—two closed questions regarding *employment status* and the *contribution of counseling*. A final open question was repeated from T2, requesting any further comment about the counseling process.

### Statistical Analysis

Our hypotheses were all one sided, and we used Type I error level of 5% to test them. To test the hypothesis regarding differences within the groups between the pre- and postcounseling in the four outcome variables (i.e., *strengths use*, *self-esteem*, *career exploration*, and *life satisfaction*), we carried out four multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with mixed design. The within-group measures were the progression of the outcome variables throughout the research, whereas the group (comparison, intervention) was the between groups factor. The size of the effect was regarded as small, medium, and large effect sizes using Cohen’s suggestion with  $d = 0.2$ ,  $0.5$ , and  $0.8$ , respectively (Cohen, 1992). The advantage of using this index is that it can be calculated regardless of sample size (Bernaud et al., 2006).

### Results

We conducted a one-way MANOVA to examine mean differences in age, family status, number of children, education, and work history as well as in precounseling *strengths use*, *career exploration*, *self-esteem*, and *life satisfaction* between the SBCC and the comparison groups. Results reflected no differences between the two groups neither in demographic characteristics nor in precounseling measures. Two chi-square tests further indicated no significant differences in gender and in previous personal experience with career counseling/psychotherapy. In order to exclude any pretest differences between participants who completed their counseling sessions (from both groups) and participants who dropped out during the research, a one-way MANOVA was conducted. Results showed no differences in demographics or in precounseling previous personal experience.

Table 1 presents the means, *SDs*, and the intercorrelations among the dependent variables at T1 and T2. As expected, *strengths use* was found to be positively correlated with *life satisfaction* and *self-esteem* both at T1 and T2 ( $r = .37$  and  $.36$ , respectively, at T1;  $r = .35$  and  $.31$ , respectively, at T2). However, only in SBCC group, *strengths use* at T1 was associated with *self-esteem* at T2 ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1.** Intercorrelations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Internal Consistency Reliabilities of Study Variables.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Strengths use (T1)	4.97 (.95)	(.88)							
2.Strengths use (T2)	5.21 (.94)	.38**	(.92)						
3.Career exploration (T1)	3.85 (.65)	.21	.18	(.89)					
4.Career exploration (T2)	3.83 (.73)	.19	.25	.53**	(.92)				
5.General self-esteem (T1)	3.84 (.58)	.36**	.31*	.17	.12	(.78)			
6.General self-esteem (T2)	3.88 (.58)	.22	.31*	.20	.24	.75**	(.79)		
7.Life satisfaction (T1)	3.98 (1.3)	.37**	.23	.13	-.07	.64**	.45**	(.84)	
8.Life satisfaction (T2)	4.1 (1.1)	.20	.35**	.14	.11	.58**	.59**	.65**	(.78)

Note. SD = standard deviation.

The values in parentheses on the diagonal are Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s internal consistency reliability estimates. ( $N = 61$ ).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Means and SDs of the Dependent Variables by Groups at Pre- and Postcounseling Measurements.

Variable	Comparison ( $n = 30$ )		SBCC ( $n = 31$ )		Between Pre and Post $F(1, 59)$	Between groups $F(1, 59)$	Interaction $F(1, 59)$
	M	SD	M	SD	(partial $\eta^2$ )	(partial $\eta^2$ )	(partial $\eta^2$ )
Strengths use (pre)	4.97	0.88	4.98	1.03	2.98* (.048)	0.12 (.002)	.18 (.003)
Strengths use (post)	5.15	0.93	5.27	0.95			
Career exploration (pre)	3.78	0.68	3.91	0.63	.02 (.002)	1.05 (.018)	.12 (.002)
Career exploration (post)	3.74	0.81	3.93	0.66			
Self-esteem (pre)	3.87	0.59	3.82	0.58	.59 (.010)	0.09 (.002)	2.79* (.045)
Self-esteem (post)	3.82	0.59	3.95	0.58			
Life satisfaction (pre)	4.19	1.12	3.77	1.30	.86 (.014)	1.32 (.022)	.77 (.013)
Life satisfaction (post)	4.20	1.02	4.00	1.10			
	M	SD	M	SD	$t(59)$	$d$	
After final session							
Satisfaction with counseling	4.77	1.8	5.35	1.7	1.28	0.33	
Progress in Personal goal achievement	4.43	1.6	4.68	1.8	.55	0.14	
Three-month follow-up Counseling contribution	3.90	1.8	4.84	1.6	2.13**	0.55	

Notes.  $N = 61$ .  $d$  = Cohen's effect size. Pre = precounseling, Post = postcounseling; SBCC = Strengths-Based Career Counseling; SD = standard deviation.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Hypotheses Testing

To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted four MANOVAs with mixed design with Group (SBCC, comparison) as the between-subject independent variable, Time (pre- and postcounseling) as the within-subject independent variable, and with *self-esteem*, *career exploration*, *strengths use*, and *life satisfaction* as the dependent variables. The results are presented in Table 2.

As hypothesized, the results for *strengths use* indicated a significant within-groups main effect  $F(1,59) = 2.98, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .048$ , observed power coefficient = .40. Effect size was small (Cohen's  $d = 0.25$ ) indicating that both the groups benefited from counseling and showed an increase in *strengths use*. No significant differences between the groups or the interaction were found. *Self-esteem* results indicated no significant main effects; however, the interaction of Time  $\times$  Group was significant,  $F(1, 59) = 2.79, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .045$ , observed power coefficient = .38. The effect size for SBCC was medium small (Cohen's  $d = 0.31$ ). Bonferroni's post hoc analyses were conducted to determine the source of the interaction. A significant difference in self-esteem between measurement times was found in the SBCC group, T1:  $M = 3.82, SD = .10$ ; T2:  $M = 3.95; SD = .10, t(59) = 3.02, p < .05$ , but not for the comparison, T1:  $M = 3.87, SD = .11$ ; T2:  $M = 3.82; SD = .11, t(59) = .40, p < .05$ , suggesting an increase in self-esteem only in the SBCC group. As can be seen in Table 2, negligible differences were observed for *Life satisfaction* and *CE* between the groups, and between the pre- and posttest, in addition, no interaction emerged.

As can be seen in Table 2, the hypotheses that *progress in achieving personal goals* and *satisfaction from counseling* will be higher in the SBCC than in the comparison group, although notable in terms of effect size (0.14. and 0.33, respectively), were not supported. However, the hypothesis that in the SBCC group *contribution of counseling* will be higher than in the comparison group was supported,  $t(59) = 2.13, p < .05, d = 0.55$ . In addition, a significant difference in employment status at T3 was found between SBCC and the comparison group,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.51, p < .05, d = 0.46$ , with 80.6% of the SBCC group employed, compared to 60% of the comparison group (see Table 3).

### Qualitative Analysis

At T2 and T3, we explored participants' responses to the open question, which requested their reporting any relevant comment concerning the counseling process. We aimed to detect group differences in the generated themes. At postcounseling (T2), the question generated 38 valid responses, and at follow-up (T3) it generated 29 valid responses. Unclear or unrelated responses were excluded from the analysis. In the first step of the content analysis, responses for each question were open coded seeking common themes and subsequently divided into five content categories. Two judges (the second author and a graduate psychology student) independently sorted the responses into the five content categories; the interrater reliability  $\kappa$  was .81. In cases of disagreement, consensus was achieved through discussion. Table 4 presents the frequency of responses for the intervention and comparison conditions across all the categories in each item. To detect differences in the comments between the SBCC and the comparison groups, we used chi-square analyses. Because our sample size was relatively small, we report an exact  $p$  value rather than asymptotic  $p$  value that assumes normal distribution. Table 4 presents the differences in responses distribution across content categories. Results indicated significant differences between the two groups in participants' comments about the counseling process at T2,  $\chi^2(4) = 7.03, p < .05$ . Examination of standardized residuals revealed that the groups differed mostly in two responses: "Counseling did not help me at all" (comparison's  $n = 6$ ; SBCC's  $n = 2$ ) and "Counseling was very helpful" (comparison's  $N = 3$ ; SBCC's  $N = 6$ ). At T3, this trend increased,  $\chi^2(4) = 7.75, p < .05$ , with the responses reported as "Counseling did not help me at all" (comparison's  $n = 8$ ; SBCC's  $n = 1$ ) and "Counseling was very helpful" (comparison's  $n = 2$ ; SBCC's  $n = 6$ ).

### Discussion

Our aim was to introduce a strengths-based individual career counseling model that incorporates elements from areas in which strength-based counseling interventions have proven effective in noncareer-focused settings. The suggested model was systematically implemented with an unemployed

**Table 3.** Employment Status by Group.

Employment Status after 3 months	Comparison (n = 30)		SBCC (n = 31)		Total (n = 61)		$\chi^2(1, N = 61) (d)$
	n	%	N	%	N	%	
Employed	18	60	25	80.6	42	68.9	3.12*(0.46)
Unemployed	12	40	6	19.4	18	29.5	

Note. *d* = Cohen's effect size; SBCC = Strengths-based career counseling.

\**p* < .05.

**Table 4.** Differences in Participants' Responses to Qualitative Items by Thematic Categories Between Experimental Groups From Chi-Square Analyses.

	Comparison		SBCC		Total		Pearson's chi-square ( <i>df</i> = 4)
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Participants' addition of any relevant comments about the counseling process at postcounseling (T2)							7.03*
More sessions are required	0	0	4	20	4	10.4	
The counselor was excellent and the sessions were meaningful	4	22.2	4	20	8	21.1	
The counseling was helpful	3	16.7	6	30	9	23.7	
The counseling gave me new perspective/direction/was generally helpful	5	27.8	4	20	9	23.7	
The counseling did not help me at all	6	33.3	2	10	8	21	
Participants' addition of any relevant comments about the counseling process at follow-up (T3)							7.75*
More sessions are required	3	18.8	2	15.4	5	17.2	
The counselor was excellent and the sessions were meaningful	2	12.5	2	15.4	4	13.8	
The counseling was helpful	2	12.5	6	46.2	8	27.6	
The counseling gave me new perspective/direction/was generally helpful	1	6.2	2	15.4	3	10.3	
The counseling did not help me at all	8	50	1	7.6	9	31.1	

Notes. *df* = degrees of freedom; SBCC = Strengths-Based Career Counseling. *N*-T2 = 38, *N*-T3 = 29.

\**p* < .05.

job-seeking clientele, thereby seeking to expand the application of strengths-based elements to a client population heretofore unlikely to benefit from them. Initial measures comparing the SBCC clientele versus conventional career counseling clientele are promising and warrant further exploration of the model. Counseling outcome and process variables were measured immediately following the intervention and 3 months later in a controlled field experimental study. Results revealed that, as hypothesized, the SBCC model promoted self-esteem, a central component of the self-concept which has been emphasized by career theorists (Savickas, 1997; Super, 1990) as a key predictor of work satisfaction. In addition, results showed that career counseling, regardless of type, increased *strengths use*. This finding is not surprising, since career counseling typically deals with identifying the client's strengths and resources and encourages using them in the work setting (Robitschek & Woodson, 2006).

In accordance with the previous findings derived from positive psychology (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2011), precounseling *strengths use* predicted postcounseling *self-esteem* only among the SBCC clients. This may indicate that the SBCC intervention provided a

framework for reinforcing existing clients' strengths, maintaining them as a personal resource, thereby resulting in enhanced self-esteem. This finding is meaningful, especially since we are dealing with unemployed job seekers whose self-esteem is typically relatively low (Winefield et al., 1991). Although *CE* and *life satisfaction* also showed trends of enhancement in the SBCC group, the difference was not statistically significant. As *CE* is a variable with particular relevance for career-choice counseling, it may have proven to be less of a factor in the current study, as most of the clientele were focused on finding appropriate reemployment in the short term, a goal traditionally less associated with career exploration.

The results demonstrated that, while no difference was found between the two groups regarding evaluation of counseling immediately upon its termination, the SBCC group evaluated the counseling significantly higher ( $d = .55$ ) 3 months after the counseling. This finding implies that SBCC has a relatively long-term impact, with SBCC being valued even more from the perspective of time, perhaps in light of the client's having processed the content and insight of the counseling and having implemented its conclusions. This finding conforms to a previous finding that the strengths use retains its effectiveness after continuous practice and after an extended time (Park & Peterson, 2008). Counseling effects extending beyond the intervention is particularly valuable for job seekers as contributing to their being inoculated against anticipated setbacks in the often disheartening job search process (Vinokur & Schul, 1997).

The results demonstrated that 3 months after the counseling, the SBCC clients were considerably more successful in finding employment (or a training course) than those in the comparison group. Although not measured in this study, job search self-efficacy is a variable that may be enhanced by the SBCC model. In a previous longitudinal study, it was found that job search self-efficacy relates positively to the total number of received job offers and number of offers received from a preferred employer, and that job search self-efficacy beliefs moderate the relationship between number of interviews and number of offers, indicating that highly confident job seekers were more effective in converting interviews into job offers (Moynihan, Roehling, LePine, & Boswell, 2003). Thus, in addition to the clients' subjective feelings, the current study yielded an objective outcome measure—employment status—significant for job-seeking clients. Previous research examining the consequences of the unemployment experience found that job loss was associated with a significant increase in distress symptoms, whereas finding a new job was associated with a significant reduction in distress (Murphy & Athanasou, 1999). Therefore, this behavioral finding may hold considerable positive ramifications for the client, and beyond that, in evaluating the cost-effective elements of employment and career counseling (Whiston, 2011).

The study's qualitative findings enriched the quantitative data and enhanced the positive results of SBCC. Several clients of the SBCC group, as opposed to only a few of the comparison group, responded that "counseling helped" them, while only a few clients of the study group and several in the comparison group reported that "counseling did not help" them. These differences were amplified with time (from postcounseling until the 3-month follow-up).

### *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies*

Certain limitations of the current study limiting generalizability need to be addressed. The sample was small, primarily due to a significant drop out of clients at the various stages of data collection. Aside from technical logistic problems, some clients may have preferred not to be disturbed by subsequent telephone follow-ups. Beyond that, career counselors in the SBCC group were briefly trained in the method just prior to the beginning of data collection, and their first counseling sessions were those examined by the study. Had the counselors practiced the model and gathered expertise prior to the start of actual data collection, the results would better reflect counseling outcomes in a real-life setting, implemented by counselors or psychologists skilled in the model. In addition, the

career counselors in the study group consisted of those who volunteered to be oriented and trained in the SBC method. This self-selection may reflect individual differences among the counselors in the study, such as personal identification with the model, motivation to pursue professional enrichment, or a demonstration of flexibility in putting aside their own conventional counseling regimen and adopting a prescribed, manual-based counseling intervention.

Future studies should examine the SBCC model with larger samples and also with career-choice clients who are not necessarily unemployed, with the assessment of counseling effectiveness focusing on variables relating to the client's career concerns. Future studies should include follow-up focus groups with counselor and client participants to obtain their perspectives on the interventions. Expanding the longitudinal element of the research appears worthy of study, especially exploring how long and under what conditions, are the positive ramifications of SBCC retained. As indicated, a small number of clients who began the SBCC model were deemed inappropriate for the process by their counselors, and their participation was discontinued. As experience is gained with the model, researchers would do well to seek to delineate the profile of the career client who would especially benefit from SBCC and those for whom it would be contraindicated.

Similarly, the SBCC model does not incorporate comprehensive career testing, aside from the VIA self-report assessment, while a majority of the comparison group clients underwent testing. On one hand, testing has traditionally served to identify prominent competencies and abilities that may be translated into strengths. However, the testing process is often adversely affected by clients' test apprehension and often reveals weaknesses that may be viewed by the client as "failures," resulting in the inverse of empowerment. Additionally, vocational testing can encourage the client's dependence on the findings (such as assessment of ability, skills, vocational preferences, and personality), thereby making him less likely to assume an active role in the counseling process (McIlveen & Patton, 2006). As in all counseling and psychotherapy research, future studies are advised to include a noncounseling comparison group in addition to the conventional career counseling comparison group of the present study. This further comparison of outcome variables would better reflect the relative effectiveness of the various career counseling elements and, in particular, their cost-effectiveness as a government-sponsored service.

### **Contributions**

One of the main contributions of this study is the design and the initial evaluation of a manual-based SBCC process. Among the advantages of manual-based treatments are well-documented effectiveness, less reliance on intuitive clinical judgment, and greater ease in training and supervising therapists/counselors in specific techniques (Wilson, 1998). This study enriches the current dearth of descriptions of actual counseling interventions by framing the SBCC process by means of a counseling protocol, elaborated in the counselor training and guidance manual. This framework allows the examination of the effectiveness of a specific counseling protocol for specific populations. The applied implications of the study are significant: helping clients find work and providing a format for responding to the call for assessing cost-effectiveness of employment counseling and career guidance (e.g., Watts & Sultana, 2004). In addition, components of the SBCC model may be adopted by career counselors who determine that clients' lack of confidence or self-esteem is a barrier to their progress.

The current study contributes to reducing the existing gap between theory and practice in employment and career counseling. This study tested the effectiveness and adaptation of strengths-based interventions derived from positive psychology as used by therapists and coaches and as applied to the employment and career client. The study contributes theoretically to the integration of positive psychology and vocational psychology as well as to the development of a theoretical model for understanding the manner by which strengths-based interventions function.

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## Authors' Notes

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## Notes

1. Career counseling in the current study refers to both career counseling and employment counseling, where appropriate short-term placement as well as long-term career planning is the focus of the counseling process.
2. The comprehensive Hebrew-language manual or an outlined English version are available from the first author.

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