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Career planning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Training for strengthening courage and career adaptability and lowering fear levels of COVID-19

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Abstract

Career development starts from childhood and during adolescence professional planning becomes a very important activity that is influenced by internal and external factors: the COVID-19 pandemic can be one of these factors. To overcome the fear that may arise about the current situation and to be able to plan their future considering recent changes in the world of work, adolescents need positive resources such as courage, defined as the tendency to act despite fear, and career adaptability, the ability to adapt to changes in the world of work. With the aim of lowering the levels fear of COVID-19 and raising the levels of courage and career adaptability, a training was developed that involved 63 adolescents (experimental group); another 62 adolescents (control group) were involved in pre- and post-training measurements. The results showed that the experimental group, after training, had lowered the levels of fear of COVID-19 and raised personal resource levels, while the control group showed higher levels of fear of COVID-19 in the second administration. This means that guidance practices can have an impact on the emotional experience of young people in the period of the pandemic and support them in planning their future

Keywords: career planning; fear of COVID-19; courage; career adaptability; career education.

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Introduction

Career development is a lifelong process influenced by both internal and external factors of the individual (Bohlmann et al., 2018; Ferrari et al., 2015; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Marcionetti & Rossier, 2016); this means that even the things that happen in the surrounding environment can have an impact on career planning (Bynner, 2012).

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially announced the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020), which has blocked public life and dealt a severe blow to the global economy (Bakker & Wagner, 2020). Recently, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated the unemployment rate to rise to record highs (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020).

The future has become unpredictable, and this post-COVID-19 unpredictability opens the way to a condition within which it becomes difficult to make choices and plan one's career path. People during a pandemic show fear and anxiety (Taylor, 2019). Fear is part of those emotions that influence thinking and behavior (Cherry, 2019); Research by Mahmud et al. (2020) showed that fear of COVID-19 affects career decisions. All this is particularly true for the new generation that is going through this historical moment, and which has been defined as the "lockdown generation" (Goyal et al., 2020; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020; Killgore et al., 2020), subjected to a heavy psychological burden. But it is equally true for the younger generations who, although not yet directly involved in the professional world, are negatively affected by the effects of the pandemic (Commodari & La Rosa, 2020).

A feature of adolescence is the emotionality that comes from the physical and chemical changes typical of this period (Bailen et al., 2019) and adolescents rely heavily on their peer group for emotional and social development (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017). However, the pandemic has forced governments to take restrictive measures that have resulted in all people spending a lot of time in their homes, including teenagers who have experienced an online school mode, physically separated from their peers. It is in this situation that they have shown a reduction in mental health, with symptoms of anxiety and depression (Hawke et al. 2020; Chen et al. 2020), concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their education (Ellis et al. 2020). For this reason, psychologists during the period of the pandemic wondered how to support young people, supporting the importance of personal resources to face the future (Karataş et al., 2021).

Among the positive resources useful in dealing with fear is courage, described as a dimension capable of allowing individuals to act despite fear (Norton & Weiss, 2009). Courage, in fact, helps people to resist external problems and to maintain the desire to do things (Magnano et al., 2019). Furthermore, it plays the role of a protective factor in dealing with risky and stressful conditions (Magnano et al., 2017) and in career choices and career path planning despite current fears (Watson, 2003). Courage mediates the relationship between fear of COVID-19 and pessimism towards one's own professional achievement (Zammitti et al., 2021a) and is positively correlated with career adaptability (Magnano et al., 2021).

This last dimension is deeply linked to change and represents the ability to adapt to changes in the world of work (Savickas, 1997), but also indicates the availability of resources that allow people to cope with the difficulties that may be encountered in professional development, including transitions and traumatic events (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012); is of particular importance during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic as it can help people see the possibilities of unexpected changes, invest in those changes, and recover from unpredictable outcomes (Rudolph et al., 2017). It can also help people respond to change in a calm and composed way (Tripathy, 2020) and stimulate more possibilities in a complicated situation (Ginevra et al., 2018).

Aim of the study

COVID-19 event influences the inclusion of young people in the world of work (Wanberg et al., 2020), contributing to creating greater difficulties in identifying future goals as it is concentrated on managing the present situation (Bianchi, 2020). Starting from this perspective, with the present study, a training was created with the aim of promoting personal resources of courage and career adaptability and lowering fear levels of COVID-19.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that the students participating in the intervention will show an increase in courage and career adaptability and lower levels of fear of COVID-19, after the training; it was also expected that these levels were different, in the post-test, compared to the control group and that the latter did not show any significant difference between the two pre- and post-test protocol compilations.

Method

Design, Participants and Procedure

This study involved 125 adolescents (64 males and 61 females) aged between 11 to 14 years (M = 12.46; sd = .60), divided into an experimental group (N = 63) and a control group (N = 62). The participants in the experimental group were involved in six career education meetings during which activities were proposed for the reduction of the levels of fear of COVID-19 and the enhancement of courage and career adaptability.

Two schools were contacted and invited to participate in the experiment. Both have declared themselves available, involving 3 classes each. The classes involved were those that the following year would have had to make the choice with respect to the high school to attend; it seemed appropriate to involve these classes to stimulate reflections on the choices in advance, and not in the vicinity of the choice itself. In a completely random way, the classes were selected to be part of the control group or the experimental group. The pupils were informed of the trial and received an invitation to participate completely voluntarily in the research and after having obtained parental consent. The inclusion criteria were to be available to actively participate in the research and to have signed parental consent.

Both in the case of students involved as an experimental group and in the case of students involved as a control group, the parents received an invitation to let their children participate in the research. The parents signed their consent to participate in

the program (in the case of the experimental group) or to only administer the research protocol (in the case of the control group). All parents signed their consent to the child's participation, so no students were excluded. The entire course was conducted in the classroom, during school hours, by a career counsellor. The students were divided into groups of 20-22 adolescents each. The data was collected in the period between February and May 2021.

Life Design Approach

The training was designed with reference to the Life Design approach (Savickas et al., 2009) which was born as a response to the changes and challenges of the 21st century and considers the individual active in building his own career (Masdonati & Dauwalder, 2010). Individuals, in fact, do not passively undergo transformations, but try to react to face the context they will have to face (Almudever et al., 1999). This approach emphasizes the strong relationship between the various ambient of life; in fact, career development comes from the interaction between a person and their environment. Consequently, all areas of life relevant to people must be considered in career construction (Nota & Rossier, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009). This translates into particular attention to qualitative activities that allow to assigning to the subjects an active role during the information collection and analysis process, and work very well within groups and emphasize the global study of the person (Soresi & Nota, 2010).

The Life Design approach, therefore, becomes an accompaniment in the co-construction of the best path for the construction of the individual's life, without neglecting the development and strengthening of some important personal resources (Masdonati, 2007). The effectiveness of this approach in triggering reflections has been demonstrated with both adults (Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves & Duarte, 2014) and adolescents (Cardoso et al., 2016).

Training

Participants in the experimental group were involved in six meetings lasting two hours each. Each meeting was held on a weekly basis and during the first and last meeting the previously described evaluation protocol was administered. The meetings, summarized in Table 1, were as follows:

First meeting. During the first meeting all participants, including the career counsellor, introduced themselves. Then students filled out the assessment protocol and watched videos about the change. Together with the counsellor, students reflected on the changes resulting from the pandemic and reported in writing the emotions that trigger these changes and how they can affect their choices. Career counselor stimulated reflection on the fear emotion, which emerged during the confrontation, proposing a less negative view.

Second meeting. Taking up the theme of emotions, students read and compiled a stimulus-story adapted from the stories of "The right choice? Mine!" (Magnano, 2011). However, the story has been modified to reflect the fear of COVID-19 and have a less negative view of it, as a core emotion that allows people to reflect and deal with a problematic situation. In support of this, a video on basic emotions was used. In both cases the students were invited to discuss their ideas in group.

Third meeting. Based on the answers received in the previous meeting, fear was linked to the concept of courage. Students reflected on the fact that courage is the tendency to act despite fear, then they identified their model of courage. Each participant was asked to think of three people who, despite fear, acted to achieve their goals. Of these people, participants were asked to identify one and answer stimulating questions to encourage confrontation with themselves: What can you learn from this person? Do you resemble them in things? What can you do to look more like her? This activity was also effective in other training (Zammitti et al., 2020).

Fourth meeting. Another stimulus-story was proposed in this meeting, together with the viewing of some videos on courage and the importance of reflecting on one's future. The videos invited participants to believe in themselves in planning the future and the reflections were reported in writing and then orally, during a group presentation.

Fifth meeting. During the fifth meeting, to stimulate career adaptability, participants carried out activities in groups: using the profession cards of the 3IP (Iconographic Professional Interests Inventory, Boerchi & Magnano, 2015), participants were asked to think about the professions of the future after the pandemic: how will they change? Will there be new professions? What positive aspects are there in these changes? During the restitution, participants reflected on the possibility of caring positively about their future.

Sixth meeting. Participants were asked to read and answer the questions of a third stimulus-story on professional design and watch other videos on change and the future. These activities summarized what had been discussed in previous meetings. At the end of the meeting, after a final return, the research protocol was again administered.

Tab. 1. **Contents of the training**

Meeting	Dimensions	Activity
1	Knowledge	Presentation and administration of the evaluation protocol (T1)
	Fears of COVID-19	Watching videos and written reflections
2	Fears of COVID-19	Stimulus-story and group reflections
		Watching video and group reflections
3	Courage	Brainstorming on the definition of courage
		Courage model
4	Courage, Career adaptability	Stimulus-story and group reflections
		Watching videos and written reflections
5	Career adaptability	Professions of the future
		Discussion on concern for the future
6	Fear, courage, and career adaptability	Stimulus-story and videos
	Closing	Closing and administration of the evaluation protocol (T2)

Measures

Before and after the intervention, the groups compiled a protocol containing the following measures. Reliability was considered acceptable if Cronbach's alpha value was as low as 0.60, as indicated by the literature (Taber, 2018).

Biographical Data. They were required to indicate their age and gender.

Fear of COVID-19. These are three items that were initially used to assess fear of SARS (Wu et al., 2009) but which were also suitable for assessing fear of coronavirus (Zammitti et al., 2021b). The scale assesses negative concerns about COVID-19. Through a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot), the participant must indicate how much they feel a certain way about COVID-19. An example item is: "Thinking about COVID-19 makes me feel anxious". Cronbach's alpha for the study sample was 0.84 at pre-test and 0.89 at post-test.

Courage. Six items of the Italian version of the Measure of Courage were used (Norton & Weiss, 2009; Ginevra et al., 2020); the scale is composed of items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The participant is asked to indicate how well each statement fits themselves. An example item is "Even if something scares me, I will not back down". Cronbach's alpha of the study sample was 0.84 at pre-test and 0.69 at post-test.

Career Adapt-Abilities. The Italian version of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Soresi et al., 2012) was used. The scale consists of 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not strong) to 5 (strongest); the participant is asked how much he feels capable of doing that thing expressed in each of the statements. The scale measures a total point of career adaptability and simple item is "Preparing for the future". The Cronbach alpha indices of the study sample were respectively 0.90 at pre-test and 0.96 at post-test.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 25.0 statistical analysis software. Before evaluating the effectiveness of the training, it was verified whether there were any differences between the control group and the experimental group at the time of the first administration of the research protocol (T1), relative to gender, age and the variables evaluated; no significant differences emerged between the two groups for *gender* ($X^2(1) = .652$, $p = 0.419$), *age* ($t(123) = -1.561$, $p = 0.121$), *fear of COVID-19* ($t(123) = 1.115$, $p = 0.267$), *career adaptability* ($t(123) = 1.233$, $p = 0.220$) and *courage* ($t(123) = 0.124$, $p = 0.902$).

To verify the research hypotheses, the following methods were used: to evaluate the effectiveness of the training, the differences between the pre-test (T1) and post-test (T2) phases within the experimental and control group were calculated, using independent sample *t*-test (Kirkwood & Sterne, 2010); moreover, we verified at post-test (T2) if there were any differences between the experimental and the control sample, using the paired-sample *t*-test (Peck, Olsen & Devore, 2015). As an additional metric of effect-size, Cohen's d was also analysed. Cohen's d effect size is one of the most popular indices in psychology. For the interpretation, the following general guidelines are often used: small (< 0.2), medium (< 0.5) and large (< 0.8) effect (Cohen, 2013; Magnusson, 2021).

Results

The independent sample *t*-test showed significant differences between pre-test and post-test in the experimental group, regarding these dimensions: *fear of COVID-19* ($t(62) = 6.198$, $p = 0.000$), *career adaptability* ($t(62) = -4.977$, $p = 0.000$) and *courage* ($t(62) = -2.857$, $p = 0.006$). In the control group there was only one difference between the first administration (T1) and the second (T2), relative to the dimension *fear of COVID-19* ($t(61) = -3.606$, $p = 0.001$).

As for the differences found in the experimental group, it is possible to interpret the effects as medium in the case of *career adaptability* (difference between means = 0.26, Cohen's $d = 0.41$) and *courage* (difference between means = 0.35, Cohen's $d = 0.28$), and as large in the case of *fear of COVID-19* (difference between means = 0.58, Cohen's $d = 0.57$). In the case of the control group, the effect on *fear of COVID-19* is medium (difference between means = 0.42, Cohen's $d = 0.40$); the latter group shows insignificant, and therefore irrelevant, effects in the dimensions of *career adaptability* (difference between means = 0.07, Cohen's $d = 0.11$) and *courage* (difference between means = 0.10, Cohen's $d = 0.06$). Table 2 and Figure 1 summarizes these results.

Tab. 2. Means and standard deviations of the experimental and control group at pre- and post-test

	Experimental group						Control group					
	Pre (T1)		Post (T2)				Pre (T1)		Post (T2)			
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	p	Cohen's D	M	SD	M	SD	p	Cohen's D
Fear of COVID-19	2.84	1.05	2.26	0.97	.000	0.57	2.63	1.03	3.05	1.05	.001	0.40
Career adaptability	3.75	0.58	4.01	0.67	.000	0.41	3.63	0.49	3.56	0.68	.441	0.11
Courage	4.89	1.22	5.24	1.22	.006	0.28	4.86	1.37	4.76	1.78	.662	0.06

Fig. 1. Differences between training group and control group at pre- and post-test

Fig. 1a. Fear of COVID-19

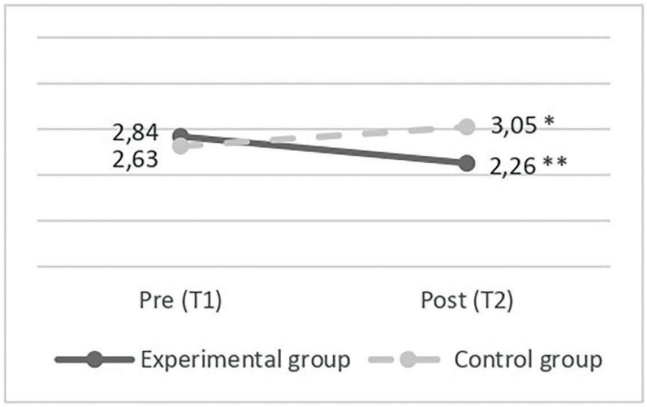


Fig. 1b. Career adaptability

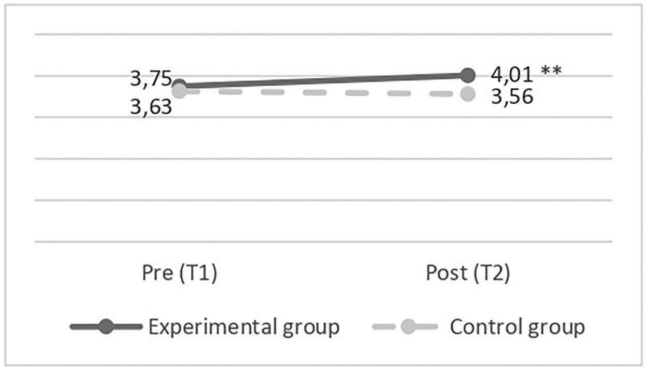
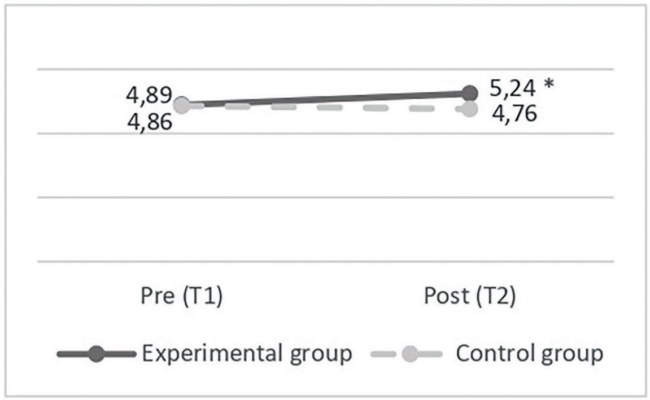


Fig. 1c. Courage



Note. **indicates significance less than .000; * indicates significance less than .05

Regarding the differences between the experimental group and the control group in the second administration (T2), paired-sample *t*-test revealed that there were significant differences regarding the following dimensions: *fear of COVID-19* ($t(123) = -4.341$, $p = 0.000$) and *career adaptability* ($t(123) = 3.715$, $p = 0.000$). No significant differences emerged regarding the dimension of *courage* ($t(123) = 1.778$, $p = 0.078$). Table 3 summarizes these results.

Tab. 3. Differences between experimental and control group in the post-test

	Experimental group		Control group		
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	p
Fear of COVID-19	2.26	1.02	3.05	1.05	.000
Career adaptability	4.01	0.67	3.56	0.68	.000
Courage	5.25	1.22	4.76	1.78	.078

Discussion

Professional planning is an activity full of anxieties, especially during adolescence, an age in which it becomes one of the main problems experienced (Erikson, 1968); planning a career in an age of change and during a pandemic can be an even more complex task. Fear of COVID-19 can generate anxiety about future careers and negatively impact well-being (Mahmud et al., 2021; Zammitti et al., 2021b).

On the one hand, courage can help people to act despite fear and, on the other hand, career adaptability can support young people to cope with the changes of this historical moment. The aim of this project, consistent with the advice that derives from the literature in times of pandemic (Karataş et al., 2021), was to improve the personal resources of courage and career adaptability in a group of adolescents and, at the same time, lower levels of fear of COVID-19.

The results showed that the training had good results; the adolescents involved in the training, in fact, had the opportunity to reflect on the fear of COVID-19, lower its levels and improve some resources that will help them to face the difficult times they will have to face after the pandemic. This is consistent with the starting hypotheses.

Contrary to what was expected, in the control group there was a significant change related to the fear of COVID-19. The increase in fear of COVID-19 in the control group could be explained by the fact that during the period in which the data were collected, schools often faced difficult situations, alternating periods of distance teaching with periods of face-to-face teaching, based on the trend of infections and the presence or absence of COVID-19 positive peers within the class. This may have contributed to increased levels of fear of COVID-19.

Career adaptability and courage are constructs that can also be traced in other orientation experiences, often associated with other dimensions. For example, Santisi et al. (2021), developed a training to enhance career adaptability, optimism, and hope in a sample of, obtain good results. Similarly, Ginevra and Nota (2018) structured training in ten units, obtaining the enhancement of some career adaptability resources in a sample of adolescents. Similar experiences have also been reported with students of other school levels: Santilli et al. (2020) developed training for high school students, enhancing career adaptability; Koen et al. (2012) achieved improvements in career adaptability levels in a group of university students; Zammitti et al. (2021c) created an online training to improve

career adaptability and other resources such as courage, optimism, hope, risk intelligence, and self-efficacy. All these studies contribute to demonstrating that career adaptability is a malleable construct, a skill that can be learned, as it was theorized by Savickas (1997, 2005) and that this can also be applied to courage understood as the intention to act despite the fear (Norton & Weiss, 2009).

An innovative element of this training is to have included a specific emotional aspect of the pandemic period: the fear of COVID-19. Generally, trainings that consider emotions aim to improve emotional intelligence (Pourmohamadreza-Tajrishi et al., 2013; Adibsereshki et al., 2016; Motamedi et al., 2017), proposing among the various activities also paths of emotion recognition. Fear is an emotion that can have adaptive outcomes in some circumstances, but some consequences can be maladaptive; is one of those emotions extensively studied during the pandemic period and much research has linked fear and decision-making problems related to career choices (Betz & Serling, 1993; Staley et al., 1997). Therefore, it was decided to consider this important aspect. The study showed that even in this case it is an aspect that adolescents can learn to manage and control, drawing only adaptive consequences.

Some limitations must be taken into consideration: the project did not involve important figures who can provide relevant support to adolescents, the parents. They should be supported and able to support their children. Indeed, during the pandemic, parents were faced with fears and uncertainties about their future and the future of their family, often experiencing a collision between their role and expectations and responsibilities (Coyne et al., 2020). This places parents within a category that needs support. But parents must also be able to support their children; parental support is negatively associated with anxiety and depression (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021).

The Project is set in southern Italy, while future research should include programs involving students of different ages and from different regions. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention must not be limited to recording only the changes that occur immediately after the training, but should include follow-up phases, for example 6 or 9 months after the training, also providing for the use of qualitative measures that evaluate the impact of the training on career choices.

Implications for the Practice

During the crisis, all governments were committed to defining ways to allow the country to recover; this has meant making challenging decisions on multiple levels, including education. In Italy, as a result of the pandemic, the government has allocated funds to provide psychological support to students in schools. Mental health professionals should actively participate in the processes of promoting personal well-being; mental health does not only involve the treatment of disorders, but also includes the possibility of promoting the development of positive resources and the ability to manage one's emotions (Kobau et al., 2011).

Psychologists can work using training to enhance the positive resources of young people and allow them to face the uncertain future that awaits them.

We must not forget that in the post-COVID-19 society career counseling must deal with more force and energy on the impact of the crisis on individuals and their professional planning.

Conclusions

The training demonstrates that it is possible to equip adolescents with useful resources to cope with career planning, even in a period of crisis. As pointed out by Steinberg (2015), the adolescent brain is characterized by plasticity, and this means that it can be modified by experience. Consequently, there is a need to respond to the pandemic crisis by trying to strengthen the resources of individuals to help them rework the current situation and allow the construction of the future.

Compliance with Ethical Standards
Conflict of interest
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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