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Youth anxiety: new tools for vocational indecision



Adolescence is characterized by being a stage with decision-making with possible long-term effects and consequences on mental health, the most common case being the decision of post-high school education. The UAB COGPRO research group has developed a set of informatic tools as a method of professional and academic guidance. One of them also works as a predictor of anxiety.

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Adolescence is characterized by being a period where young people must make a whole series of decisions that have an impact not only in the short term, but also throughout their lives. The main problem is that these decisions must be made when they still know little about themselves. Therefore, when the right tools are not available, the risk of making wrong decisions can be very high, having emotional and mental health repercussions on teenagers.

One of these decisions, which certainly has an impact on young people's lives, refers to vocational choice. At the age of 16 (when they finish ESO) or at 18 (when they finish higher education) they are pushed to choose a career or a profession, frequently neither the tools nor the knowledge to do so.

Throughout the history of vocational guidance, the use of questionnaires and tests to vocationally guide young people has become widespread. These instruments are based on explicit, declarative answers. Explicit choices are often heavily conditioned by seemingly rational criteria, such as career opportunities or average income, while implicit interests have to do with personal satisfaction. For example, a young person may state that they would like

to be a lawyer or an economist (for explicit reasons), when they really like music or painting (for implicit reasons). In this example, it is clear that explicit-interests (those assessed through questionnaires or tests) may be quite different from what they are really interested in (implicit interests).

In our study, we considered the measurement of implicit interests within vocational interests and their relationship to anxiety and some personality traits. 304 adolescents from the last year of ESO took part in the research. They were given three computer programs: the first one assessed implicit-interests (PrUnAs: Preferences Unobtrusive Assessment); the second program assessed explicit interests, and the third one was concerned with self-knowledge. All the software was designed and implemented by the researchers. Participants also underwent a paper and pencil test to measure anxiety (STAI).

Results showed that there was a coincidence between explicit and implicit interests of slightly less than 50%, which shows that not assessing implicit interests can lead to wrong decisions in roughly the half of the cases. In addition, the program PrUnAs has not only proven to be a reliable tool for assessing implicit-interests but has also shown to be a good predictor of anxiety.

The main conclusion of the study is that implicit- and explicit-interests are not the same, and that having a good tool for assessing implicit interests can help young people reduce the level of indecision that is rather common at this age. Thus, significant gains are expected in adolescents' quality of life and mental health.

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References

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