

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Humanities & Social Sciences papers

Bond University

Year 1994

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effects of personal development training
in the long-term unemployed

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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING IN THE LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED: A PILOT STUDY

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Increased psychological well-being has been found for long-term unemployed women and unemployed female sole parents after participation in personal development training. There is a dearth of information, however, on the effects of personal development training for unemployed men. This issue is investigated in a pilot group of 25 long-term unemployed males and females who attended personal-development training. Pre and post measures were taken on a number of psychological variables (self-esteem, depression, psychological distress, hopelessness, mood states and life satisfaction). Results indicated that females significantly improved on a number of variables post training, but males did not. Further research into gender differences is recommended as findings have training policy implications.

Findings from numerous studies which have examined the link between psychological effects on well-being and unemployment have demonstrated a clear negative impact (Donovan & Oddy, 1982; Feather, 1982; Stokes & Cochrane, 1984; Tiggemann & Winefield, 1984). There has been a dearth, however, in the literature investigating the effects of strategies to promote psychological well-being in the unemployed which should consequently assist them to find employment or a better quality of life.

The few studies available, mainly involve skills-based courses where results indicate that course participation increases the likelihood of employment (Cassell, Fitter, Fryer, & Smith, 1988; Salipante & Goodman, 1976; Warr & Lovatt, 1977). As well as an increase in the likelihood of employment, Stafford (1982) also measured and found an increase in psychological well-being over the duration of a program.

Very few empirical studies have investigated the effects of interventions specifically aimed at increasing psychological well-being. Such interventions take the form of personal development courses rather than skills-based courses, and focus on issues such as self-esteem, assertion, increased knowledge of employment and educational options, and personal management skills. Two recent Australian studies have empirically examined the psychological effects of locally-based intervention programs of this type for unemployed sole-parents and long-term unemployed, and found increases in psychological well-being (Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Muller, 1992a). These are discussed in more detail in a later section.

A large-scale study in the United States, focussing on an intervention designed to assist individuals to cope with job loss, also found an increase in positive mental health for course participants (Caplan, Vinokur, Price & Van Ryn, 1989). Pearson (1988), in a British study, reported on a program aimed at encouraging unemployed professionals to discover new employment opportunities. Success was demonstrated by 92% of the participants returning to employment, however measures of psychological well-being were not reported and 68% of the subjects had been unemployed for less than six

months. Support, however, for personal development courses for the unemployed has come from a number of descriptive studies (Bruyere, Stevens & Pfost, 1984; Coates, 1988; Margaret, 1988; Mattox, 1987; Thorsen, Thorsen, Nichol & Prain, 1993).

Personal development courses

Personal development courses broadly focus on assertion training, communication skills, goal-setting, decision making and stress management, and often introduce or re-introduce current job search methods. Most of these programs in Australia, are known by names such as 'workforce re-entry courses' or 'work preparation courses' and are conducted mainly for female clients. (This is not based on any formal evidence, rather, courses have emerged to meet local needs).

The Jobs, Education and Training program (JET) is specifically aimed at sole parent pensioners, and has a target group of over 90% women (Department of Employment, Education & Training, 1990). Up until recently, unemployed women returning to the workforce were also considered a special target group by the Department of Employment, Education & Training (Withanage, June, 1991, personal communication). Consequently, the needs of these groups resulted in the emergence of such courses with a predominantly female focus. The findings of the two Australian studies will be discussed in some depth to highlight the aspects of psychological well-being under investigation.

Two previous Australian studies on psychological well-being

Harry and Tiggemann (1992) examined the psychological effects of personal development training of 118 females sole parents from metropolitan and country areas of South Australia. Measures in relation to demographic variables, financial situation, life satisfaction, confidence, work expectations, employment commitment, negative affect, depressive affect, negative mood, self esteem and psychiatric morbidity were taken on three occasions (Time 1 = first day of course, Time 2 = last day of course and Time 3 = 4 weeks later). No significant differences were found in comparison to a control group of 61 subjects at Time 1 for demographic or psychological variables. At Time 2 course participants showed a significant increase in life satisfaction, confidence in the course to change their lives and the expectation that the course would result in employment or further participation in training. Significant changes in the positive or healthy direction were also found for course participants on the psychological measures of depressive affect, negative mood and psychiatric morbidity. Self esteem also increased, but in both the experimental and control groups.

At Time 3 it was found that training participants were more likely to have commenced vocational courses (47% vs 0%) but were not more likely to have found employment. With respect to psychological measures, the positive changes at Time 2 in depressive affect, self esteem and negative mood were maintained at Time 3 and a further decrease in psychiatric morbidity was found at Time 3. Clearly, this study demonstrates the positive effects of such training and the maintenance of these effects in the short-term (4 weeks later).

In a similar study, Muller (1992a) examined the effects of personal development training on the psychological state of 32 long-term unemployed women in metropolitan Brisbane. Measures were taken on five psychological variables (depression, self esteem, psychiatric morbidity, life satisfaction and health) on four occasions (Time 1 = first day of course, Time 2 = last day of course, Time 3 = 2 months later and Time 4 = 6 months later).

In comparison to a control group, significant positive changes were found in the participant groups' levels of depression and self esteem at Time 3 and self esteem at Time 4. Although the sample used in this study was relatively small ($n = 32$), such significant results maintained over a 6 month period, suggest a positive effect for this type of training. These results are consistent with the findings of Harry & Tiggenmann (1992) and indicate a need for further research of this nature.

Evidence suggests, therefore, that personal development type courses are beneficial to long-term unemployed females and to female unemployed sole parents. Would such finding, however, generalise to unemployed males? A review of the studies comparing unemployed women to men would suggest that this may not necessarily be the case (Muller, 1992b; Muller, Hicks & Winocur, 1993).

It is the aim of this present study to begin to examine gender differences in the psychological effects of personal development training. A pilot group of 25 long-term unemployed participants was available for this initial study.

Method

Subjects

Subjects consisted of 11 males and 14 females who were participants in a 6 week (1 day per week) pilot personal development course conducted by a metropolitan employment office. All subjects were considered long-term unemployed as they had been unemployed for a period greater than 12 months and were in receipt of Newstart Allowance. All subjects had previously worked in the clerical field or were seeking work in this area. It was not possible for administrative and ethical reasons to form a control group in this instance as all subjects were required to participate in this training.

The mean age for each group was 32 years for males and 29 years for females. Both groups were matched on a number of demographic variables (See Table 1). Interesting differences, however, are noted in the variables of number of dependent children, educational level and health problems. Males tended to have more dependent children, a higher educational level (of greater than 3 years of secondary school) and a greater percentage of health problems than females.

Refer Table 1.

Procedure

All subjects were required to attend an information session about the training as part of their Newstart Agreement and were given a questionnaire to complete at this time.

Subjects were randomly allocated to different mixed gender groups and training commenced in the following week. Each group received training for one full day per week over a six week period. The same group membership was maintained over the six week period and each group always received their training on the same day of each week. The content of the program consisted of full day sessions on self esteem, assertion, stress management, conflict resolution, an outdoor confidence building activity and goal setting. Each session was conducted by a different private training provider to evaluate the appropriateness of the provider for further employment, and to provide a variety of training approaches. The same trainer, however, always conducted the same session for each of the different groups. The aim of this training was to motivate participants and improve their psychological well-being in order to facilitate their participation in further skills-based training programs and eventual employment.

At the end of the six week period, participants were again requested to complete the questionnaire. Depending on their preferences and needs, participants were then streamlined into further skills-based training. A further follow-up at the end of these programs was planned (3 months later), but due to the attrition rate (84%) there were not enough subjects left to allow further analysis.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire elicited demographic information (as described in Table 1) and responses on six standardised psychological tests (Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory, Beck Depression Inventory, General Health Questionnaire, Beck Hopelessness Scale, Profile of Mood States and Life Satisfaction Scale). These psychological tests measured self esteem, depression, psychological distress, hopelessness, mood states (tension, depressive affect, anger, vigour, fatigue and confusion) and life satisfaction, respectively. A review of the reliability, validity and prior research uses of these tests is described in Muller (1992a), Muller (1992b) and Muller, et al (1993).

Results

Because the sample was not randomly selected, and they were all long-term unemployed subjects, it could be expected that a skewness in the data would occur. On this basis and due to the small sample size, nonparametric statistics were used. The Kruskal-Wallis test compared males and females on the psychological variables at Time 1, no significant differences were found.

The Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed ranks tests was used to compare measures taken at Time 1 with those taken after the intervention at Time 2. Results are shown in Table 2. Males were found to have changed significantly on only one variable. They had increased confusion at Time 2. A comparison of females at Time 1 and Time 2 on the psychological variables revealed several significant differences. They had a significant increase in self esteem, tension and vigour and a significant decrease in depression, psychological distress, hopelessness and confusion.

Refer Table 2.

Discussion

Results of this pilot study suggest that gender differences emerge in the effects of *personal development courses on psychological well-being*. Females appeared to benefit from personal development training, but males did not. Although these results must be interpreted with caution, due to the sample size and lack of control group, such significant findings suggest the need for further investigation and clarification.

One possible interpretation in this particular study, maybe that the predominance of female trainers and the amount of self-disclosure required in the mixed gender groups may have alienated male participants and consequently contributed to the results. Anecdotal information from Skillshare, who frequently include personal development elements in their skills-based courses, supports this view (Rochester, September, 1992, personal communication).

A further interpretation, may be that males in general do not respond well to discussing emotional issues and sharing their feelings with others. This may be enhanced in unemployed males whose masculine identity has already been confronted by their inability to find employment. The link to this concept of 'masculine identity' (i.e. being the breadwinner/provider and seeing work as central in the role of identity establishment) has been reported in other studies as a reason for negative psychological well-being in unemployed males (Muller, 1992b; & Muller, et al, 1993).

Results may also be reflective of differences in some of the demographic characteristics. Males reported more health problems, were less likely to be in a relationship, had less prior training, and higher mean number of months unemployed compared to females. These differences should be examined more closely in future studies.

Previous empirical studies (Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Muller, 1992a) have only used female subjects and therefore have not considered gender differences in response to this type of intervention. Caplan, et al (1989) examined gender differences with respect to interactions of treatment conditions and demographic variables, but no significant differences were found.

Although this is a pilot investigation, the findings suggest a need for further research into gender differences and the psychological effects of these types of interventions. It is suggested that perhaps the rapid rise in the local development of personal development programs for a subject group of predominantly females, has led to the needs of male participants being overlooked. Two questions, however, must also be raised - (i) do males need or want this type of training? and (ii) does it have a positive effect on their psychological well-being? Given the recent increase in male participation in these types of courses and the continued government funding for them, further research on the effects of such courses and a training needs analysis specifically examining personal development elements for males, appears highly desirable.

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