

Cognitive Behavioral Group Training for Welfare Recipients: A Psychoeducational Approach to Improving Employment Outcomes

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Abstract

Welfare recipients face numerous psychological barriers to employment. However, these barriers are rarely addressed in welfare-to-work programs. This article provides a conceptual model and a description of a psycho-educational group training, based on cognitive behavioral therapy that can be helpful in improving employment outcomes for welfare recipients. Implications for working with welfare recipients are discussed.

Keywords: Welfare, Cognitive behavioral therapy, Social work, Employment, psychological problems

Finding family supporting jobs is difficult, especially during tough economic times. This is particularly problematic for low income women on welfare because they are faced with multiple barriers to employment. Without family supporting jobs, mothers may not be able to enhance the well-being of their families. Welfare recipients may not find jobs because of low levels of education, lack of transportation, and child care (Danziger et al., 2002). In response to these barriers, most states offer job development programs to improve recipients' human capital, and provide childcare and transportation services (Sano, Richards, & Lee, 2011). Hidden however, are the psychological and behavioral issues that individuals on welfare face that present significant barriers to their employment. An intervention that is based on psychological principles and has been shown to boost employment outcomes would be of considerable value. This paper describes a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)-based training program that is designed to help improve employment outcomes for welfare recipients.

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Psychological Problems among Welfare Recipients

Psychological problems such as depression and anxiety disorder, as well as less severe issues including low self-efficacy are common among those receiving welfare (Coiro, 2001; Danziger et al., 2001; Olson & Pavetti, 1996; Zedlewski & Alderson, 2001). For example, Danziger et al. (2002) using data from the Women's Employment Study (WES) found that 35% of the individuals had at least one mental health problem. National studies have also shown high prevalence of mental illness among welfare recipients. Based on a national sample of welfare recipients, Zedlewski and Alderson (2001) found that about 25% of the individuals had mental health problems. This is higher than the share (19%) of the general population that experience mental illness (Lee, 2005). Having certain psychological characteristics can affect an individual's ability to secure and maintain employment and therefore leave welfare (Danziger et al., 2002; Kozimor-King, 2008; Olson & Pavetti, 1996; Steffick, 1996). Danziger et al. (2002) found that women with mental health problems had jobs that were unstable and paid less compared to women who had few employment barriers. Kozimor-King (2008) analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) found that psychological problems, such as low locus of control and poor self-efficacy are related to longer welfare use. Notably, there was evidence that occupational efficacy (measured by one's perceived ability to achieve occupational aspiration), affects the odds that an individual will exit welfare and get married, rather than remaining on the program.

Ensminger (1995) also conducted a longitudinal study and found that long-term welfare recipients were more likely than the general population to have higher psychological distress. These results indicate that persistent psychological issues are potential contributors to long-term welfare dependency. Hawkins (2002) also highlights the relationship between social psychological factors and self-sufficiency of welfare recipients. Hawkins found that higher levels of positive psychosocial characteristics such as image of and feelings about one's self were associated with higher scores of self-sufficiency among recent welfare leavers. Self-sufficiency in this study was defined as no longer receiving welfare, working at least part-time, having a saving or checking account, having income or financial resources beyond welfare, and having belief that one's current income is enough to cover financial expenses. In the case of women who were still on welfare by the end of the study period, scores on positive psychological characteristics decreased, indicating the relationship between psychosocial characteristics and welfare status.

The prevalence of these psychological issues among welfare recipients could be that individuals who have been on welfare for a long time begin to doubt their ability to find a job, and therefore become less motivated to look for a job (Della-Posta & Drummond, 2006). Proudfoot (2009) supports this theory by suggesting that unemployment, especially long-term unemployment brings psychological strains that further impedes one's ability to be re-employed. She noted that having lower self-esteem and expectations of being successful can reduce the likelihood of finding a job. It could also be that the psychological issues preceded the unemployment, making it difficult for people to keep and eventually find a new job. Regardless of the timing, the prevalence of the psychological issues among welfare recipients represents a substantial cost to these individuals as well as to society.

Despite the prevalence of these psychological characteristics, and their impact on employment, most of the efforts to help welfare recipients find jobs have focused on job training and skill development, while the psychological needs of recipients are largely ignored. Failure to address psychological issues represents a missed opportunity for welfare agencies to help improve the employment outcomes of welfare recipients. In this vein, I postulate that a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates psychosocial and employment training approaches could be ideal for helping welfare recipients to transition into employment. Based on this premise, the principles of CBT were adapted to develop a group training program for individuals at a welfare-to-work agency. The program was intended to raise critical consciousness of the participants' work-related thoughts and behavior as well as to provide the basis for change. This paper is not intended to provide data on the effectiveness of a CBT-based program but to provide a conceptual model and description of a program that could be used by welfare-to-work agencies.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Employment

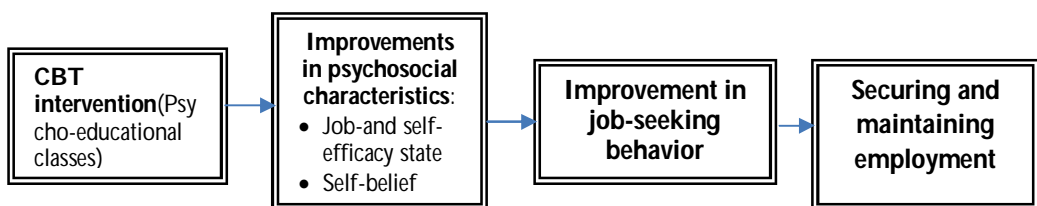
Scholars such as Leahy (2004) have found CBT to be an effective tool in addressing psychological disorders. However, it has not been widely used to address employment-related issues (Cole, 1998; Proudfoot et al., 1997; Proudfoot et al., 2009; Ruwaard et al., 2007; Sullivan & Stanish, 2003) and is non-existent in employment related issues faced by those receiving welfare (Schmidt & McCarty, 2000). The few CBT programs that have been evaluated were found to have positive effect on non-psychiatric populations, including unemployed individuals.

Proudfoot and his colleague (1997) found that compared to those in a control group, individuals in a CBT training group were more likely to have increased scores in job-seeking, self-esteem and self-efficacy. They were also found to be more motivated to work and were generally more satisfied with life than those who did not receive the training. Further, these improvements in the treatment group were still observed in a 3-month post-test following the intervention. Proudfoot et al. (2009) also designed and evaluated a cognitive behavioral training for financial services sales agents. One hundred and sixty-six of these agents were assigned to either a control or treatment group. The researchers noted that those in the treatment group were more satisfied with their jobs, had a better attitude towards working and more productive overall than the agents in the control group. Further, there was less employee turnover. Della-Posta and Drummond (2006) also conducted a 4-week CBT-based training for job-seekers on worker's compensation. The study found that relative to a control group which only received job training, individuals in the treatment group experienced improvement in their affective states and found employment more rapidly. CBT based training has also been used to help improve the well-being of employees. For example, Ruwaard et al. (2007) who conducted a 7-week CBT-based treatment on 177 participants also found improvements in the employees' stress and anxiety levels. Specifically, they found that 50% of the sample were no longer clinically stressed after receiving the CBT treatment. Based on these findings, a psychoeducational intervention model using CBT was developed for welfare recipients at a welfare-to-work agency in a major U.S. city. The overall goals of the intervention were to help mothers on welfare to improve their psychological characteristics and ultimately their chances of securing jobs. The conceptual model below (see figure 1) depicts how the approach can improve employment outcomes.

The CBT-based program is based on the assumption that cognitive behavioral training coupled with the standard employment training will help to improve job- and self-efficacy and self-belief among welfare recipients. I theorize that individuals who receive psycho-educational training on topics such as problem solving, and addressing cognitive distortion would be better able to respond to the challenges of finding a job and being more confident in their abilities to find a job. This psycho-educational training essentially addresses the internal blocks of lack of self-belief and self-efficacy. Internal blocks are "internalized negative valuations (of the oppressor) that are incorporated into the developmental experiences of the individual" (Lee, 2001, p. 32). Accordingly, individuals on welfare often internalize the stigma attached to receiving welfare.

In addition, they may also internalize the discrimination faced in the job market based on their welfare status. The model suggests that improvements in self-efficacy among welfare recipients can lead to improvements in job-seeking behavior such as being more assertive in applying for jobs, and being better prepared for interviews. This could in turn lead to better employment outcomes for welfare recipients.

Figure 1: The CBT Intervention Model



Overview of the Training Program

The CBT-based training project sought to address the well-being of individuals on welfare by empowering them to think more positively and develop their self-belief thereby placing them in a better position to take advantage of job opportunities. The program was “psychoeducational” in that it combined a CBT approach with the education elements. The basic elements of the program were group sharing, cognitive restructuring, and stress management. Uniformity of the sessions were maintained through the use of a treatment manual which was developed based on the principles of CBT. The CBT group training consisted of four weekly sessions. Elements in these sessions were informed by CBT-based approaches used on different populations (Della-Posta & Drummond, 2006). An orientation to the classes was held on the Friday prior to the beginning of the four-week session. The orientation focused on the overall purpose of the program, and program description. Sessions were held for 45 minutes each day over the four –week period.

Week 1. This week focused on habits of thought and behavior. The aim was to help the participants to differentiate between positive (*optimistic*) and self-defeating (*pessimistic*) thinking styles as well as to identify the impact of negative thinking styles upon feelings and behaviors. Participants had to generate a list of negative core beliefs that can create a more pessimistic style of thinking.

They then had to brainstorm some challenges to the negative thoughts and come up with ways to have a more realistic perspective. Throughout this and the following weeks they were encouraged to keep a 'thought diary' as a way of increasing consciousness of any negative thought patterns.

Week 2. This week addressed cognitive distortions. Participants were taught the different types of distortion and to recognize the impact of cognitive distortions on individual mood attitude, behaviors and expectations. Through role play, participations had the opportunity to practice methods and strategies for challenging different patterns of cognitive thinking. The session also addressed the importance of having pleasant thoughts and engaging in positive activities throughout the day.

Week 3. The discussion centered on problem solving. Participants were reminded of the functionality of problem-solving. Further, they were taught some common problem-solving strategies. Central to this session was learning how to "think outside the box", brainstorm solutions, rely on others for cues and perspectives, recognize difference perspectives, interpret and apply various perspectives to a singular problem, recognize the value of communication and listening skills.

Week 4. During this final week participants learnt about mindfulness and positivity. This addressed the need to stop and pay attention thereby becoming aware of present realities. The underlying assumption was that increased awareness of one's realities, leads to awareness of the need for connection, comfort, and recognition. Participants were challenged to feel positive and confident about themselves and abilities, particularly as it related to finding jobs. Through several group activities and sharing they were taught how to build confidence and motivate themselves.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social workers are tasked with helping to improve the well-being of low-income individuals. This is particularly true of individuals on welfare. The 1996 welfare reform policy, with its features of time limit and sanction for non-compliance, has placed tremendous focus on improving self-sufficiency among welfare recipients. Social workers are uniquely placed to help welfare recipients improve their conditions as many social workers practice in welfare-to-work agencies (Rank & Hirsch, 2002).

Further, many practice in social service agencies which serve low income families (Taylor & Barusch, 2004). Social work practice with welfare recipients (as with other populations) is enhanced when there is multi-dimensional perspective to viewing and addressing a problem. This is also true of the barriers to employment that welfare recipients face. Given that psycho-social characters have been identified as a barrier to welfare exit, social workers practicing with this population should seek ways to address this barrier. The CBT-based intervention is not intended to be an antidote for all psychological problems. Further, this paper is not the presentation of results from a controlled experiment on the use of CBT-based intervention for welfare recipients. Instead, it is a description of an intervention model that social workers might consider using to help welfare recipients overcome an employment barrier and thereby increase their chances of exiting welfare. Further, I propose the CBT based model as a beginning step to help social workers and others working in welfare-to-work agencies to think more broadly about employing different strategies to help address the psycho-social needs of welfare recipients.

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