Self-Efficacy and Job-Seeking Activities in Unemployed Ethnic Youth

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ABSTRACT. The authors examined variables predicting the self-efficacy and the job-seeking activities of 103 unemployed ethnic youth from diverse cultural backgrounds. Whereas self-esteem and acceptance by the host culture were significant predictors of self-efficacy, the major predictors of job seeking were (a) the extent to which the ethnic youth felt accepted by members of the dominant culture and (b) the difference between their cultural backgrounds and the dominant host culture. Implications of these findings for enhancing the employment of ethnic youth are discussed.

Key words: job seeking, unemployed ethnic youth

RESEARCHERS HAVE DEFINED the deleterious psychological and physical effects of unemployment, especially for people who are long-term unemployed (Dooley & Catalano, 1988; Feather, 1990; Mortimer, 1991; Schwefel, Svensson, & Zollner, 1987; Warr, 1987). Although these effects are relevant to a sizable proportion (ranging up to 10%) of unemployed adults in many Western countries, the extent of the problem is actually greater with young people (i.e., those under 25 years), among whom unemployment can be up to two or three times higher. Even worse, however, is the situation of ethnic youth (i.e., those born overseas or in the host country to immigrant parents), because unemployment among the youth of some ethnic groups can range up to 40% (e.g., Vietnamese youth in Australia).

Variables relating to both employers and to young ethnic job seekers themselves are likely to contribute to employment status. In relation to employers, for example, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the perceived competitiveness of young job applicants diminishes as their deficiencies in the host culture’s language increase (Bogusia, 1994; Myhill, Herriman, & Mulligan, 1994). In addition, it is

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plausible that employers are less disposed to hire young job applicants who are members of a minority culture that is different from, rather than similar to, the dominant host culture. The assumption here is that employers might believe that a job applicant from a culturally different background, as opposed to one similar to the dominant cultural group, would have different work values or behaviors or would be less able to communicate and interact successfully with fellow workers and clients.

Consistent with the assumption in the preceding paragraph is a growing body of research affirming that cultural differences are reflected in differences in work values and behavior (Adler, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Palich, Hom, & Griffeth, 1995; Verkuylten, de Jung, & Masson, 1993; Williams, Whyte, & Green, 1965). In addition, research findings from the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada indicate that migrant groups sharing cultural similarity with the host culture were more accepted and were the recipients of less prejudice and stereotyping than were groups whose cultures differed markedly from the host culture (Dijkjer, 1987; Ho, Niles, Penny, & Thomas, 1994; Lalonde & Cameron, 1993; van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998).

Although the attitudes and perceptions of employers are undoubtedly of great significance in determining the employment outcomes of unemployed ethnic youth, the particular focus of the present research concerned the variables that influence the job-seeking activities of such youth. In short, which variables actually predict the extent to which unemployed ethnic youth expend efforts to seek employment (e.g., prepare résumés, answer job advertisements, seek job interviews, undergo job training) and, hence, increase the probability of securing employment?

Consistent with the findings of Bandura (1986, 1995), we assumed that the major and most immediate predictor of job-seeking activities among unemployed ethnic youth would be their level of self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in their ability to achieve a positive outcome). Although the impact of self-efficacy on the job seeking of unemployed ethnic youth has received little attention, research among unemployed members of the dominant cultural group has emphasized the significant effect of self-efficacy on success in gaining employment (Kanfer & Hulin, 1985). Indeed, the foregoing researchers found that self-efficacy was the only significant predictor of subsequent reemployment. Furthermore, researchers have shown that increasing general self-efficacy levels motivated intensification of effort (Eden & Aviram, 1993) and that self-efficacy training for unemployed workers increased reemployment (Caplain, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989).

Although there were good grounds for anticipating that the perceived self-efficacy of unemployed ethnic youth would be a major and immediate antecedent of their job-seeking activities, the issue of particular concern to us was the identification of variables that influence the levels of self-efficacy among unemployed ethnic youth. We considered the potential significance of several variables. First, we expected that the general level of self-esteem of ethnic youth
would be a significant predictor of their level of self-efficacy, consistent with the results of previous research (Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Gelfand, 1965; Rosenberg, 1979; Tang, Liu, & Vermillion, 1987). Second, we assessed ethnic identity (i.e., the extent to which a youth retains the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors of his or her ethnic group) as a potential predictor variable. Although research has revealed that the exploration of ethnic or cultural identity issues may be important to ethnic youth (Phinney, 1990), the present significance of ethnic identity lies in the possibility that it may provide a psychological resource for young people (e.g., acceptance by others who provide advice and help) that may strengthen their sense of self-efficacy (e.g., Nicassio, Solomon, Guest, & McCullough, 1986; Shisana & Celentano, 1985; Zhou & Bankston, 1994).

We assessed two other potentially significant predictor variables: The third was the extent to which unemployed ethnic youth receive support from family, and the fourth was the extent of their support from friends. Again, although the predictive significance of those variables has not been directly evaluated, consistent with their importance is evidence indicating that unemployed (as opposed to employed) youth required greater support from their families (Patton & Noller, 1991) and experienced poorer psychological adjustment if they had little friendship support (Donovan & Oddy, 1982; Winefield, Tiggemann, Winefield, & Goldney, 1993).

Finally, we speculated that two other variables might have an impact on self-efficacy: The fifth was the extent to which ethnic youth consider their cultural backgrounds dissimilar to the host culture, and the sixth was the degree of their acceptance by members of the dominant cultural group. Just as the cultural dissimilarity of young ethnic job seekers may influence the employment decisions of employers, it is highly probable that ethnic youth become aware of their standing and acceptance in the host community (Milner, 1996; Vaughan, 1986) and that their standing affects their beliefs in their ability to achieve employment.

Method

Participants

We recruited 103 ethnic youth (42 men, mean age = 22.10 years, \( SD = 2.28 \); 61 women, mean age = 21.67 years, \( SD = 2.36 \)) through the assistance of the Australian Government Employment Service, which mailed out questionnaires to known unemployed ethnic youth in Southeast Queensland. The participants had diverse ethnic backgrounds: Of the total, 31% were from New Zealand; 25%, from Europe (i.e., Bosnian, Polish, Italian); 20%, from Southeast Asia (i.e., Vietnamese, Chinese); 9%, from the United Kingdom; 8%, from the Middle East; 4%, from the Caribbean; 2%, from Africa; and 1%, from South America. Their education backgrounds were also diverse: Of the total, 42% had completed Year 12 (U.S. senior year); 30% had earned a certificate or diploma (i.e., had com-
pleted postsecondary technical training); 13% had completed Year 10 (U.S. sophomore year); 9% had university degrees; and 5% had not completed Year 10.

**Instruments**

We developed and administered a questionnaire that included Phinney's (1992) 20-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure for youth and Rosenberg’s (1965) 10-item Self-Esteem Scale. In addition, 1 item measured extent of family support (i.e., “My family supports and cares for me”), 2 items assessed number of ethnic and Australian friends, 1 item measured extent of acceptance in Australia (i.e., “I feel accepted by Australians”), and 2 items measured the extent of difference between the participant’s own ethnic culture and the Anglo-Australian culture (e.g., “How similar or different do you think your ethnic background is to the Anglo-Australian culture?”). To assess self-efficacy, we included 4 items (e.g., “When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work”) from the general Self-Efficacy subscale of General Self-Efficacy Scale (Sherer et al., 1982), together with 6 items (e.g., “I have devoted much effort to looking for jobs”) from Blau's (1993) job-search measure. Participants responded to the questions on 7-point bipolar scales (1 = no, 4 = uncertain, 7 = yes).

**Data Analysis**

We summed the scores on each of the multi-item measures and carried out exploratory analyses of the data on all distributions of scores, to ensure that there was a fit between the distributions and the assumptions for regression analysis. Cronbach’s alphas on all measures ranged from .65 to .85 ($M = .77$). We then assessed the predictive significance of the independent variables via two multiple regression analyses, with self-efficacy and job seeking as the criterion variables.

**Results and Discussion**

**Self-Efficacy**

The regression of self-esteem, ethnic identity, family support, number of friends, cultural dissimilarity, and dominant group acceptance on self-efficacy was significant, $F(6, 96) = 8.16, p < .001$; the two significant predictor variables were self-esteem, $\beta = .42$, and dominant group acceptance, $\beta = .28$. Together, these variables accounted for 34% of the variance of self-efficacy.

The finding that self-esteem emerged as the strongest predictor of self-efficacy is unsurprising in view of the results of previous research (Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Gelfand, 1965; Rosenberg, 1979; Tang et al., 1987). As with other groups, when unemployed ethnic youth feel good about themselves, that feeling
influences them to believe that they can achieve positive outcomes. Of greater interest, however, was the finding that the extent to which ethnic youth felt accepted by the dominant cultural group also influenced their self-efficacy beliefs. Clearly, the present participants had learned that their ability to achieve for themselves was constrained by their level of acceptance by members of the host culture.

On the preceding point, several other observations are also noteworthy. For example, although researchers have revealed that ethnic youth were interested in exploring their ethnic identities (Phinney, 1990) and derived self-esteem from their ethnic identities (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; present study), ethnic identity was not a significant predictor of self-efficacy in the present research. Thus, although ethnic identity may have been a source of some pride to ethnic youth, it apparently was not a resource that strengthened their sense of self-efficacy, contrary to our earlier speculation. Similarly, neither the support provided by family nor that provided by friends contributed to their self-efficacy. Viewed together, our findings clearly indicate that, for the ethnic youth in the present study, the contributions of their ethnic identities and the support of family and friends to their sense of self-efficacy simply paled in comparison with their acceptance by members of the host culture, as well as with their general level of self-esteem.

**Job Search**

The regression of the aforementioned variables, plus self-efficacy, on job seeking was also significant, $F(7, 95) = 6.39, p < .001$. Contrary to expectations, however, self-efficacy was not revealed as a significant predictor, although it did approach conventional levels of significance, $p < .08$. Instead, the two significant predictors were acceptance by Australians ($\beta = .35$) and the difference between the participant's own ethnic background and the Anglo-Australian culture, $\beta = -.21$, which together accounted for 32% of the variance. In short, the more that unemployed ethnic youth considered that their cultural backgrounds were similar to, as opposed to different from, the dominant host culture, and the more they felt accepted, rather than rejected, by members of the host culture, the more they expended effort in trying to find jobs.

Viewed in the light of previous research, the unexpected finding in the present study was that self-efficacy was not a significant predictor of the job-seeking activities of unemployed ethnic youth. Instead, regardless of their feelings of self-efficacy, their job seeking depended on how they perceived their standing in the host culture. Our findings indicate that unemployed ethnic youth, compared with unemployed youth who are members of the dominant cultural group, believe that their ethnicity (although a source of pride) constitutes an added burden in the job market—a burden that increases as their cultural backgrounds (and, perhaps, their physical characteristics) increasingly diverge from the host
culture. Moreover, for the youth in our study, ethnicity and the dominant group's reaction to it apparently outweighed any sense of self-confidence or competence that they might bring to the job market. The clear implication of our results is that attempts to enhance the employment of unemployed ethnic youth must take into account the attitudes of the wider host society, in addition to particular work-related skills and attitudes of ethnic youth.

REFERENCES


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