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An Analysis Of Self-Efficacy, Welfare Status, And Occupational Choice Among Female Single Parents

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Abstract. The concept of self-efficacy has been proposed as a possible explanation why women are deterred from pursuing higher paying, traditionally male occupations. This study sampled 199 women pursuing occupational training in Vocational-Technical Institutes to obtain some measure of occupational self-efficacy and compare those measures by non-traditional occupational training and welfare status.

Introduction

The concept of self-efficacy has been proposed as a construct that explains why women choose traditionally female careers by Hackett and Betz (1981), Lent and Hackett (1987). Neville and Schleckner (1988), Stringer and Duncan (1985) and Whiston (1993) found that women in their research samples exhibited lower confidence and expectations of their abilities toward nontraditional occupations than toward traditionally female occupations. Moreover, Benjamin and Stewart (1989) proposed the usefulness of the self-efficacy concept in understanding the factors that lead to welfare dependency and the connection between public assistance and participation in the workforce. They found lower levels of self-efficacy and lessened work orientation in individuals who had received assistance for greater lengths of time. On the other hand D'Andrea and Daniels (1992) developed a motivational program to increase self-efficacy among welfare mothers which they maintain was successful.

Criticism of the welfare system in recent years has led to efforts to find ways to move welfare recipients to gainful employment. Between 1992 and 1993, 36 states have been approved by the Department of Health, Education and Human Services to introduce innovations related to welfare reform. These innovations include introducing time limits on benefits, work requirements related to benefits, and caps on increases in family size during the eligibility period (U.S. Department of HEHS, 1996). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of August 22, 1996, requires adults to return to work after two years of benefits and limits lifetime benefits to five years.

In this environment, the poverty and welfare issue of a sizable portion of our population, heavily female, appears open to unfair manipulation by politicians. In this environment, women who are single parents risk even greater marginalization unless interventions can be made to assist them in training for occupations that will help them enter the mainstream of society. Yet the poverty and welfare issue is complex and closely related to educational attainment. The U.S. Department of Education (1994) reported 67.5% of working women over 25 who had less than high school completion earned less than \$12,500 annually as did 47.8% of women over 25 who had a high school diploma or a GED certificate. Those women in the above statistics who are single parents, of course, have incomes below the poverty level. This prompts Hodgkinson (1991) to refer to the feminization of poverty and to lament the effect this poverty has on the next generation. Indeed, 23% of American children, birth to age five, live in poverty. The majority of these children in poverty live with female single parents, many of whom work full time, but at low-income service jobs (Hodgkinson, 1991).

Problem Addressed in this Study

The current climate of public opinion is one of discontent with the nation's welfare system. The discontent focuses on growth in caseloads, rising costs, and the perception that the welfare system fosters long-term dependency among beneficiaries. A consensus seems to exist among taxpayers, practitioners, politicians and even welfare recipients themselves that the traditional AFDC program should be changed to place a greater emphasis on increasing self-sufficiency of the recipient. The U.S. Congress has promoted self-sufficiency through legislation making benefits temporary, and thus, in the mind of Congress encouraging employment. Funding for training exists through JTPA, although this program serves only a small percentage of the targeted population. Moreover, many in the targeted population lack self-esteem and, as described in the literature, are low in self-efficacy. As a result, so the argument goes, these women choose traditional female service occupations that pay lower wages, making it difficult for them to bring themselves and their children out of poverty.

Theoretical Framework Guiding the Study

Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as expectations and beliefs about one's ability to successfully perform a given behavior. Strength of self-efficacy determines whether behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be maintained in the face of obstacles or aversive experiences. It is acquired and altered through performance, accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. Self-efficacy is not a passive trait or characteristic, but rather a dynamic aspect of the self-system that interacts with the environment and with other motivational mechanisms. Lent and Hackett (1987, p. 348) stated, "self-efficacy determines what we do with the skills we have."

Benjamin and Stewart (1989) proposed the usefulness of the self-efficacy construct in understanding the factors affecting welfare dependency and the connection between receipt of public assistance and participation in the workforce. These researchers theorized that the mastery of behaviors needed for labor market success, including obtaining the appropriate educational credentials, has a direct effect on one's self-efficacy which, in turn, influences future choices about participation in the labor market. London and Greller (1991) pointed out that women can be blocked from career opportunities as effectively by their own beliefs and assumptions as they can by the discriminatory practices of others in the labor market.

Method

The purpose of the study was to analyze measures of self-efficacy among female single parents enrolled in vocational training as the construct relates to the receipt of welfare and occupational choice. The study was exploratory in nature and did not move beyond existing, intact groups from displaced homemaker programs at Vocational-Technical Institutes in Oklahoma. The design chosen was a 2 X 2 analysis of variance using the Linear Model of analysis on the SPSS program for micro-computers. The independent variables were welfare status and occupational choice. Levels of welfare status were welfare/non-welfare. Levels of occupational choice were traditional female occupation/non-traditional occupation.

The dependent variable, self-efficacy, was measured using a modified version of the Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale (OSES) that was developed by Betz and Hackett (1981). Permission was obtained from the instrument authors both to use the instrument and to modify it for use on this particular population. The OSES was developed as a "measure of general occupational self-efficacy, as an aid to help explain the continued under-representation of women in traditionally-male dominated careers (Betz & Hackett, 1993, p. 6)." Form B of the OSES was used which lists 10 traditionally female occupations and 10 traditionally males occupations for a total of 20 items. Each of the 20 items requires respondents to mark a confidence level for that particular occupation on a zero to nine Likert type scale.

Content validity for the instrument derives from descriptions of domains of interest coming from the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor (Betz & Hackett, 1981). Using this source they defined traditional female occupations as those in which 70% or more of the workforce were women, and nontraditional occupations as those in which women comprised 30% or less of the workforce.

The Manual for the OSES (Betz & Hackett, 1993) includes various reliability coefficients from other studies which have used the instrument. These coefficients range from .91 for the traditionally female occupations to .92 for the traditionally male occupations, with an alpha coefficient of .94 for the total measure. Test-retest reliability for a one-week interval were reported to yield coefficients of .55 to .70.

For the purposes of this study, the occupations were examined to determine if they met the current definition of traditional and nontraditional occupations appropriate to Oklahoma in 1997. The State of Oklahoma 1995 Labor Force Information Manual for Affirmative Action Programs (Oklahoma Employment Security Commission, 1995). Information from this manual clearly indicated that the original occupations used in Betz and Hackett's 1981 study needed to be changed to meet the criteria of 30%/70% originally established by them. Hence the OSES was modified to more accurately reflect the current Oklahoma labor force. To make the occupations both realistic and comparable in terms of educational levels required, the modified occupations were obtained from Oklahoma Workforce 2000: Labor Supply and Demand (Oklahoma Dept. of Vocational and Technical Education, 1996). Once the 20 occupations were determined, they were randomly sorted for item sequence. The instrument along with added questions to identify seven demographic characteristics of the respondents was pilot tested yielding reliability coefficients of .97 across the entire scale and .97 for traditionally male, and .90 for traditionally female occupations.

Because the 2 X 2 design required a minimum number of subjects to fill each of four cells for analysis purposes, the sample was based on a quota above all other considerations. An effort was made to select a sample of 200 subjects from the population of interest. The population consisted of female heads of household who were single parents, aged 18 to 40 years old, who were attending vocational-technical schools in Oklahoma. All subjects were currently enrolled in the Displaced Homemaker/Single Parent programs in the Vocational-Technical system in Oklahoma.

Results

Instrument packets (610 of them) were mailed in early April to fourteen Coordinators of Single Parent/Displaced Homemaker programs in Oklahoma. Coordinators were purposely selected according to the number of enrollees reported in their programs. Two hundred and forty nine completed questionnaires were returned. Nineteen were excluded because they were incomplete; 31 were excluded because the demographics did not fall within the sampling frame. There were 199 valid responses for a return rate of 25%.

The average ages of the respondents was 27.8 years, the median age was 27. Fifty-nine percent (n=118) of the subjects reported their single parent status as divorced or separated; 38% (n=76) were never married; less than 3% were widowed. One hundred and thirteen (57%) of the total sample was receiving welfare benefits. Of the 86 women not receiving welfare, 39 were receiving food stamps which meant that over 76% of the sample qualified as economically disadvantaged. They were better educated than national figures warrant reporting 10.6% lacked a diploma, a far better rate than that reported by the National Institute for Literacy (1994).

Because the response rate resulted in unbalanced cell sizes, the proposed ANOV was abandoned in favor of the General Linear Model (GLM). This procedure was intended to analyze the main effects of the independent variables, as well as any interaction. The differences in self-efficacy scores between women on welfare and those not on welfare was not significant ($F = .34$, probability $>.05$), with the mean scores for welfare recipients being 11.4, while the mean scores for non-welfare recipients was 11.7. The differences in self-efficacy scores between women enrolled in non-traditional occupational training programs and those enrolled in traditionally female programs were not significant ($F=1.69$, $p >.05$), with comparative mean scores of 10.5 and 10.9 respectively. Nor did the analysis of self-efficacy scores reveal any interaction.

Discussion

With the exception of a few individuals, none of the subgroups in the study reported low self-efficacy scores. Total scale scores ranged from 4 to 18 out of 18 possible points. If the scale were to be arbitrarily divided at mid point, 67% of the total sample would be above the mid-point on the scale. Moreover, this positive skew was also evident in the traditionally male occupations. Of all groups, 54% would fall above the mid-point on the scale of self-efficacy for male oriented occupations. However, where only 54% of the entire sample exhibited self-efficacy scores above the mid-point on traditionally male occupations, 77% of the entire sample scored above the mid-point on the self-efficacy scale for traditionally female occupations. Thus, while there was no significant difference in self-efficacy scores between subgroups, a larger percentage of the women were more confident in their abilities to be successful at traditionally female careers than toward traditionally male careers. This echoes Nevill and Schleckers' (1988) finding that both the high and low self-efficacy women in their study showed a higher degree of self-efficacy toward traditionally female occupations.

Further analysis showed that nuisance variables may have unduly influenced the results of this study. Because the age ranges were great in the study, 18 - 40, not using age as a covariate, might have muddied the study, since, according to Hackett and Betz (1981), Nevill and Schleckers (1988) and Stringer and Duncan (1985) older members of the four groups might have received greater socialization to traditionally female occupations than the younger members. The same observation was made by Read (1991) who found that no almost women over the age of 45 in her study enrolled in non-traditionally female occupational training.

Although the results of the study showed no differences in occupational self-efficacy between women pursuing non-traditionally female occupations and those pursuing traditionally female occupations, it also highlights the fact that a small percentage of women pursue and enter non-traditional careers. This fact has been identified in the literature (AAUW, 1995; Bowen, Desimone & McKay, 1995; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991 and National Network for Women's Employment, 1994). Occupational areas such as secretarial, health care and other service careers were over-represented among the research sample. Of the 199 women participating in the study, 132 were pursuing traditionally female careers.

Implications for Further Research

Further research should focus on why so few women train for higher wage, male-dominated occupations. Additional exploration of the self-efficacy construct and other variables that impel or deter women toward certain careers should be explored. In particular Whitson's (1993) theory that women are naturally inclined to work with people rather than things and therefore would have higher self-efficacy toward occupations dealing with people. Her study of 191 employed women found that higher self-efficacy scores were related to the kind of work involved, and that the women in her study showed higher scores related to tasks which involved person to person contact. Future research could well follow this line of inquiry as well as inquiry aimed at self-efficacy.

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