



## NEUROTICISM AND MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED YOUTH ATTENDING OCCUPATIONAL SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS

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**Summary**—This paper reports on short-term mental health outcomes for long-term unemployed youth who attended 16 week occupational training programs in Australia. Outcomes for 30 participants were compared with 52 waiting-list control subjects. Results were also analysed controlling for the independent variable of neuroticism to determine the influence of personality on outcomes. Courses were government funded Youth Conservation Corps programs, and consisted of work experience in National Parks (70%), and class-room training (30%). Measures used were the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale, the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972, 1978), and the 12-item neuroticism scale from the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett, 1985). The courses resulted in significant improvements in self-esteem for participants, but not reductions in psychological distress. High pre-course levels of neuroticism were associated with poorer well-being for all subjects. For participants, post-course psychological distress scores, but not self-esteem scores, remained associated with neuroticism. Level of neuroticism was not related to well-being outcomes. Implications are that well-being is related to personality as well as situational and personal agency variables. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

### INTRODUCTION

It has been well documented that for most individuals the experience of unemployment is generally negative to their psychological well-being. Evidence for this has come from early studies carried out during the Great Depression of the 1930s (e.g. Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938), and from more recent studies conducted since the 1970s when the Western economies again went into decline, and unemployment again rose (for recent reviews, see Allatt & Yeandle, 1992; Barling, 1990; Feather, 1990; Leana & Feldman, 1992; Winefield, 1995; Winefield, Tiggemann, Winefield & Goldney, 1993).

Few studies have examined ways to reduce these negative psychological effects of unemployment. In particular, there have been very few studies that have evaluated well-being outcomes of training-based interventions for unemployed people (e.g. Caplan, Vinokur, Price & van Ryn, 1989; Creed, 1995; Donovan, Oddy, Pardoe & Ades, 1986; Eden & Aviram, 1993; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Muller, 1992; Stafford, 1982; Winefield, 1985). Moreover, the evidence from these evaluations has proved equivocal.

Mental health benefits as a result of training have been identified by reductions in psychological distress (e.g. Donovan *et al.*, 1986; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Stafford, 1982), by improvements in self-esteem (Donovan *et al.*, 1986; Oddy, Donovan & Pardoe, 1984; Winefield, 1985), by improvements in life satisfaction (Donovan *et al.*, 1986; Oddy *et al.*, 1984), and by reductions in levels of depression (Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Winefield, 1985).

Some of the benefits identified for participants while they were in training have also been found to persist at follow-up (Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Muller, 1992; Winefield, 1985). However, not all evaluations of training courses for unemployed individuals have been able to demonstrate mental health improvements for participants as compared with control subjects (e.g. Branthwaite & Garcia, 1985; Caplan *et al.*, 1989). Some reports have also identified negative mental health consequences for participants (e.g. Donovan *et al.*, 1986; Kristensen, 1991; Oddy *et al.*, 1984).

Much of the literature investigating the negative effects of unemployment has given attention to examining a large number of individual (e.g. age, sex) and situational (e.g. financial strain, social support) variables, which act to moderate the individual's reaction to unemployment and influence his or her capacity to cope with it. The individual's disposition and personality have been examined

from this perspective and have been found to affect individual responses to being unemployed. Levels of neuroticism, for example, have been found to moderate the experience of unemployment, with well-being levels being influenced by the way an individual experiences anxiety. Specifically, high levels of neuroticism have been related to elevated levels of psychological distress (Kirchler, 1985; Payne, 1988; Schaufeli, 1992).

For this paper, outcomes for a group of long-term unemployed youth who attended an occupational re-training program were examined, and contrasted with the experiences of a waiting-list control group. The goals of the course were to deliver occupational, job search, and interview skills training. However, the courses were also expected to improve well-being and general functioning so that unemployed young people would be better equipped to deal with the return to work process, or to start any new job. The results of this study were also analysed controlling for the independent variable of neuroticism to determine if this personality factor influenced the outcomes for participants. Well-being outcome variables investigated were self-esteem and psychological distress.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Experimental subjects were long-term unemployed course participants who attended government sponsored Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) training programs in a number of centres across Queensland, Australia, during 1993. The results for the 30 course participants (67% male; mean age of 18.76 years) were compared with the results for 52 waiting-list control subjects (52% male; mean age of 18.81). All 82 subjects were long-term unemployed youth (unemployed longer than 6 months) and met the selection criteria for the courses.

### *Training Courses*

The YCC was a joint Federal and State Government project, which had the stated aims of "providing participants with a range of life and work related skills to assist them in obtaining employment, further education or training" (Department Environment & Heritage/Department Employment, Vocational Education, Training & Industrial Relations, 1992, p.5). All YCC programs used standardized curricula that comprised both in-the-field and workshop-based training. In-the-field training occupied the most substantial component, around 70%, and consisted of trainees constructing bush tracks and huts under the supervision of experienced trades people. The workshop training included occupational and social skills modules, such as: first aid, power tools, general ecology, and track construction. One module of life-skills training was also included. Courses for 14 participants ran full-time for 16 weeks.

### *Procedure*

Participants were administered questionnaires in-person prior to the commencement of the course (Time 1) and on completion of the program (Time 2). Control subjects were given Time 1 questionnaires in person, and received Time 2 questionnaires by mail.

### *Measures*

Two standardized scales were utilized to measure psychological well-being. Both scales have previously been used in occupational studies, and have satisfactory psychometric properties reported in the literature. The scales were (i) the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965); and (ii) the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (Goldberg, 1972, 1978).

To investigate whether the level of neuroticism of participants had an effect on the well-being outcomes of the training course intervention, the 12-item neuroticism scale of the short version of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck *et al.*, 1985) was administered. Validation studies of the questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975; Eysenck *et al.*, 1985) support the factor structure of this dimension. Scores obtained for subjects in this current study were consistent with those reported by Eysenck *et al.* (1985).

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