



Training to raise unemployed youth's work commitment in Tianjin

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ABSTRACT

Securing sustained employment for unemployed youth depends on the youth's work commitment, which would require training for the youth's soft skills. However, training for the youth has not been impressively effective and the effectiveness would hinge on the youth's need for training. Such a need is likely to stem from the youth's experience of powerlessness. To examine the possibility, a survey collected data from 249 unemployed youths in Tianjin, China. Results show that the youth's powerlessness was a significant condition raising the contribution of soft skill training to work commitment. This conditioning effect was valuable because neither soft skill training nor powerlessness manifested a significant main effect on work commitment. The results imply the suitability of providing soft skill training to alienated unemployed youth to elevate their work commitment.

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1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is a problem drawing public concern in China (Bai, 2006; Wu, 2003) as well as industrialized countries in the West (Julkunen, 2002; Worth, 2003). At societal level, the local economy and competition in the international labor market certainly are determinants of youth employment (Bynner, 1996; Mills & Blossfeld, 2005). Apart from the demand-side factors, the supply-side factors of the youth (i.e., aged below 30) have a role to play. A supply-side factor that puts youth into a disadvantaged position is the youth's deficit in work commitment (Bynner & Parsons, 2000; Carmeli, 2003). Work commitment is therefore of concern because of its relationships with work adjustment and productivity (Firestone, Garza, & Harris, 2005; Hyggen, 2007). Hence, a way to secure the employment of youth tends to be the boosting of work commitment in unemployed youth (Hyggen, 2007). The means to boost work commitment inevitably rests on training to raise unemployed youth's interpersonal skill, work attitudes or ethic, and eventually an identity for work (Hammer, 2007). These qualities are soft skills that require designated training, apart from training on vocational or hard skills (Maxwell, 2007; Smyth, 2008). Soft skills are particularly essential for emotional labor, which means regulating one's emotion for the work purpose, as required for an increasingly competitive, restructured labor market (Taylor & Tyler, 2000). Training on soft and hard skills

embodies the human capital development approach to upgrade unemployed youth's employability, which refers to adaptation to the changing work environments (Lindsay, McQuiad, & Dutton, 2007). However, the approach has not proven to be notably effective, based on many studies in the West (Karoly, 2001). A probable concern is that the effectiveness depends on the context and thereby the youth's life experiences. Particularly, the experience of disempowerment or alienation is likely to happen in the youth's life, such as that in a low-skill, low-paid job (Schissel, 2001). The experience is likely a condition for the rationale and success for training to uplift the unemployed youth's soft skills in tackling disempowerment (Parsons, Gutierrez, & Cox, 1998). This conditioning effect is the focus of the present study in a Chinese context.

The aims of the study are to verify the applicability of theories developed in the West to the Chinese context. Consequently, the study would generate knowledge useful for tackling youth unemployment in a Chinese context. The non-experimental design of the study is useful to illustrate the effect of training in a natural, real-life setting, similar to other studies of work attitudes and behaviors (Gallie, White, Cheng, & Tomlinson, 1998; Rosenbaum, 2001).

Unemployment, in this study, generally refers to disengagement from employment either voluntarily or involuntarily. It thus encompasses worklessness and the absence of labor force participation. Notably, voluntary worklessness, as well as involuntary unemployment, is currently the problem for the active labor market policy to tackle (de Koning, 2007; Meager, 2007). Unemployment is especially a problem to youth because many of them do not have full-time work experience and notably commitment to work (Worth, 2003). Moreover, unemployment in youth is particularly problematic because the youth usually are still economically dependent on their

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parents and thereby ineligible for receiving public assistance, which is often only available to unemployed household heads, including those in China (Leung, 2006; Lu & Feng, 2008).

Work commitment, in this study, refers to favorable behavior for work or employment, concerning putting one's effort into work (Meeus & Dekovic, 1996). Particularly relevant to youth unemployment, work commitment is of keen concern about employability and related policy (Worth, 2003). Such commitment is also especially important for youth to secure employment, even though it is not so important for sustaining older people's employment (Gallie, 2004). Because of its contribution to sustained employment, work commitment is decidedly worth the promotion and research attention (Jacob, 2008).

Training, in this study, refers to that provided outside school to upgrade the unemployed youth's aptitude in either soft or hard, vocational skills (Rowold, 2007). Particularly, training is a focal service of the human capital development approach emphasized in China (Lu & Feng, 2008). As such, training is common in employment services provided by employment centers or other public agencies in China.

Alienation refers to an experience of disempowerment, which deprives one's self-realization (Blonna, 2000; Seeman 1991). Specifically, the study taps the experience of powerlessness, which is a dimension of alienation indicative of disempowering, controlling, and depriving one's autonomy and mastery over life and work in particular (Seeman, Seeman, & Burdos, 1988). The experience of alienation typically lowers involvement in, satisfaction with, and resistance to work or life and increase the sense of burnout (Hodson, 2001). Removing alienation is also of policy concern (Rosner & Patterman, 1991).

Promoting unemployed youth's work commitment, probably through soft skill training in response to the alienating or disempowering life experience is a crucial policy goal (Hammer, 2007). Firstly, work commitment is integral to employability, which covers aptitudes for adapting to work (Lindsay et al., 2007). Secondly, work commitment is instrumental to work persistence, performance, and quality (Furnham, 1997). These work outcomes are clearly desirable and consistent with the goal of empowerment (Yoon, 2001). Hence, work commitment as a quality of work deserves promotion and related research. The promotion would rely on soft skill training, designed to strengthen work identity and goals and empower one to overcome difficulties in work (Worth, 2003). Such training is an integral part of the human capital development approach to tackling unemployment (Plimpton & Nightingale, 2000). Informed by human capital theory, the approach is prominent in employment services (Blank, 2002), especially those in China (Lu & Feng, 2008). According to the theory, general work skills dealing with commitment and interpersonal relationship are especially conducive to work (Xu, 2005). Besides, vocational skills dealing with technical parts of jobs are also an important form of human capital. Advancement of such skills is especially pertinent to China to cater to its rapid economic and technological growth (Zhu & Yuan, 2001).

The principal impetus for the study is the existing finding about the ineffectiveness of training or the human capital development approach for raising employment and related outcomes (Blank, 2002). Particularly, the approach and training are ineffective for unemployed youth (Lafer, 2002; Lerman, 2000). Reasons about the ineffectiveness include the low need for skill upgrading in low-skill, low-paid jobs suitable to unemployed youth (Grogger, Karoly, & Klerman, 2002). Hence, attending training would be particularly futile for the youth, because many of them do not have work experience and commitment (Mangum, 2000). The dilemma in the unsuccessful use of training to raise the unemployed youth's work commitment is decidedly in need of research to identify conditions for leaving the dilemma. A promising condition would spring from the reference to need fulfillment theory as a guidepost for the effectiveness of training, as well as other efforts (Davies, Fernandez, & Nomer, 2000; Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998). Simply

put, the theory posits that training is effective only when it fulfills the trainee's need. In the case of empowering unemployed youth, alienation or powerlessness is likely to be a need condition for making soft skill training effective. This conditioning effect on training is the major hypothesis of this study, together with the main effects of training and powerlessness.

1.1. Theory and research about raising work commitment

Training, powerlessness, and their interaction are the three hypothesized determinants of the unemployed youth's work commitment. Their effects respectively build on human capital theory, empowerment theory, and need fulfillment theory, which specifies the condition for the success of the former two theories.

Human capital theory states that skill, experience, and other forms of human capital are necessary to provide the power and resources for work and other qualities (Simmons, Bok, Churchill, & Pritchard, 2001). Importantly, investment such as attending training is essential to acquire human capital (Granger, 2002). The theory therefore maintains that investment is the cause of getting an outcome. In the case of unemployed youth, human capital theory means that receiving training specific to work motivation is a determinant of work commitment. Therefore, soft skill training would be particularly conducive to the unemployed youth's work commitment. An additional explanation stems from the proposition of human capital theory that general, transferable, or portable skills would be beneficial (Xu, 2005). Research usually indicates the contribution of training to work or employment (Mosley & Muller, 2007). Moreover, commitment, performance, and other qualities of work are also outcomes of training (Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002). Some studies specifically found the contribution of training to the employment of unemployed people, including the youth (Gottschalk, 1998). However, training also shows its ineffectiveness for unemployed youth in even more studies (Greenberg & Cebulla, 2008; Heckman & Lochner, 2000). The youth's work commitment, particularly, has not appeared to benefit from training (Bynner & Parsons, 2000). Hence, human capital theory and its proposition about training may not be a complete explanation for unemployed youth's work commitment.

Empowerment theory states that the experience of powerlessness prevents one from realizing one's talent, such as performance in and commitment to work (Sarmiento, Lashinger, & Iwawiw, 2004). The theory originates from the traditional view that an alienating productive relation would constrain productive force (Schervish, 1981). The productive relation refers to that between an employee and an employer, therefore involving access to capital, authority, and expertise. Productive force is the means to using capital, authority, and expertise efficiently. Research thereby shows that alienation, as in a lower class location, is detrimental to work commitment (Soidre, 2004). Moreover, alienation has appeared to be the cornerstone for resistance, burnout, and weakened morale at work (Hodson, 2001). Empowerment, through the enhancement of autonomy, personal mastery, relationship building, and therefore collective efficacy, then is a means to counter alienation (Letendre, 1999). The theory therefore echoes and elaborates human capital theory by highlighting the contribution of soft skill training (Darby, 1996).

Need fulfillment theory generally holds that an action is effective only when it fulfills the need for the action (Davies et al., 2000; Edwards et al., 1998). In the case of youth unemployment, the theory suggests that training is effective only when the youth is in need of the training. More specifically, soft skill training is effective only when the youth experiences alienation in life, therefore, needs empowerment in commitment, competence, and collaboration at work. Research has found that social services are helpful only when the receiver of the services needs the services (Davies et al., 2000). Such theory and research lead to the risk principle, which posits that provision of services

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