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Can intervention in emotional competences increase employability prospects of unemployed adults?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to explore the effects of a structured intervention in emotional competences (EC) on employability prospects of unemployed adults. More precisely, the objective is to analyse whether enhancing EC (such as identifying and expressing emotions, understanding emotions, and regulating one's own and others' emotions) can improve perception of employability, job search, entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial self-efficacy and improve reemployment success among unemployed participants. Seventy three participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental (40) or control group (33), and the experimental group underwent a 15 h intervention focused on improving EC and developing effective emotion regulation strategies. Both groups completed all the measures before the intervention (T1), one month later (T2), and six months after the intervention (T3). The results showed that the participants in the experimental group significantly increased their level of perceived employability, overall entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and three dimensions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy after the intervention, unlike their control group counterparts. Moreover, the experimental group showed more reemployment success and less reemployment delay than the control group. No changes were detected in job search or entrepreneurial intention in either group after the intervention. In addition, the positive effects of the intervention were not maintained six months after the intervention. The results suggest that structured interventions in EC can increase people's beliefs in their own capabilities (entrepreneurial self-efficacy) and their ability to find employment (employability) and can contribute to the actual reemployment.

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1. Introduction

Unemployment has negative consequences and produces costs for economies, societies and individuals. The economic and social costs usually refer to reduced economic growth potential, scarce economic resources, social deprivation and other socially related problems, such as increased poverty, a rise in crime rates and worse health (Hooghe, Vanhoutte, Hardyns, & Birgan, 2011; Stenberg & Westerlund, 2008). The individual costs of unemployment, however, involve loss of income, social contacts and social status, but also impaired physical and psychological well-being of unemployed individuals and their families (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). Governments often try to prevent unemployment and improve the employment prospects of unemployed citizens (Graversen & Van Ours, 2008; Petrongolo, 2009; Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). There are many examples in the literature of different types of interventions aimed at helping unemployed individuals regain employment or

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cope with the stressful effects of unemployment, but, to our knowledge, none of them has focused on improving the emotional competences (EC) of unemployed adults. Studies on interventions for unemployed people usually focus on personal development characteristics, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation or coping skills (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & Van Ryn, 1989; Creed, Machin, & Hicks, 1999; Machin & Creed, 2003). On the other hand, different studies have shown that EC training could have beneficial effects on individuals. These studies have mainly been conducted in educational contexts (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Ruiz-Aranda et al., 2012; Ruiz-Aranda, Salguero, Cabello, Palomera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2012), although in some of these studies, training in EC had positive effects on adults as well (Kotsou, Nelis, Gregoire, & Mikolajczak, 2011). As Kotsou et al. suggest, it would be interesting to investigate which individuals/groups can benefit, or not, from these types of interventions.

From this perspective, the purpose of the present study is to explore whether a structured intervention focusing on teaching unemployed individuals to better identify and express their emotions, understand their feelings, use them to think and act better, and manage their own and others' emotions can improve their employability prospects. Focusing on enhancing EC, the aim is to improve their job search skills, increase their perceptions about the possibilities of finding a job or starting a business, and enhance their intention to start their own business. In addition, we would like to examine whether this kind of intervention can increase reemployment among unemployed adults. To the best of our knowledge, this particular topic has not been used in previous interventions for unemployed individuals.

1.1. Unemployment research

A large amount of research in the field of unemployment has been dedicated to investigating the effects of job loss, more precisely the negative effects on well-being.

Previous research confirmed that many stress-related consequences are a result of this specific situation, including poor psychological health, depression, and an increase in physical complaints, suicide and mortality (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). Several factors are believed to moderate the effects of unemployment on mental health. These factors range from demographic characteristics, such as marital status, age or minority status, to socio-economic factors, such as market opportunities or the social welfare system (Paul & Moser, 2009). Research has shown that unemployment duration is one of the factors that enhance the negative impact of unemployment. The risks for well-being increase as unemployment duration increases. Not only do long-term unemployed people suffer the effects of unemployment more, but their chances of benefitting from any planned intervention are also much lower (Koen, Klehe, Vianen, & Annelies, 2013; Paul & Moser, 2009). The process underlying these results might be the prolonged exposure to stress and anxiety caused by unemployment. This prolonged exposure to stress, along with deteriorated emotional self-regulation, decreases the chances for healthy coping with the negative consequences of unemployment. Moreover, the possibilities of finding new employment drop as well, for a variety of reasons — from a lack of job skills and knowledge to labour market requirements. Research shows that employability and job search intensity (and quality) are very important factors for re-entering the job market and regaining employment. Employability usually refers to people's perceptions of their possibilities of finding and keeping new (in the case of unemployment) or equivalent or better (in the case of employed individuals) employment (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2008; Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). Employability depends on the individual's knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) and his/her ability to change those facets and adapt to new circumstances (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). In the context of unemployment, this “proactive” characteristic of employability makes it an important resource for coping with negative effects of unemployment. As some research suggests, individuals who perceive themselves as more employable evaluate unemployment as less harmful and choose better coping strategies to confront the stressful consequences of unemployment (Fugate et al., 2004). Furthermore, employability is linked to better and more proactive job search behaviours and, consequently, positive job search outcomes (Fugate et al., 2004; Koen, Klehe, Vianen, & Annelies, 2013). If employability depends on psychological resources (skills, abilities, knowledge), enhancing people's EC might lead them to have better perceptions of their employability prospects.

Another important and valuable source of employment and reemployment is entrepreneurship (Hisrich, Langan-Fox, & Grant, 2007; Malchow-Moller, Schjerning, & Sorensen, 2011). Entrepreneurship is defined as a specific interaction between individuals and their environment, consisting of having entrepreneurial intent and identifying, evaluating and exploiting opportunities (Eckhardt & Shane, 2003; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Shook, Priem, & McGee, 2003). Although the newer definitions and conceptualizations of entrepreneurship emphasize the role of opportunities for the entrepreneurial process, in the present study we focus on two aspects of entrepreneurship — the entrepreneurial intention and entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Whether the outcome is creating value (Hisrich et al., 2007) or creating a company (Laguna, 2013), or whether the individual demonstrates entrepreneurial activities inside the organization (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), the entrepreneurial process usually starts with the intent to open a new business or start a new venture (Shook et al., 2003). Intention is, however, just one of the elements in the entrepreneurial process (Shook et al., 2003). Among many individual differences that are believed to affect the entrepreneurial process, entrepreneurial self-efficacy is one of them. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy can be defined as people's belief in their ability to take entrepreneurial actions based on their assessment of the necessary skills they possess (De Noble, Jung, & Ehrlich, 1999). Research shows that entrepreneurial self-efficacy is related to entrepreneurial intention and the actual business start-up (Chen, Greene, & Crick, 1998; De Noble et al., 1999; Laguna, 2013). Moreover, research has shown that entrepreneurial self-efficacy, among other variables, is what distinguishes entrepreneurs from non-entrepreneurs, suggesting that increasing it can be useful for improving employability prospects (Aviram, 2006).

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