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Assisting Unemployed Adults Find Suitable Work: A Group Intervention Embedded in Community and Grounded in Social Action

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Addressing unemployment, which is currently at the highest levels in recent times, is a social justice imperative. A 3-week (15-day) group intervention for long-term unemployed adults grounded in empowerment and advocacy is presented. The group incorporates the Job Club model with personal awareness and career self-efficacy. In addition to working with clients to help them find jobs, an employer liason advocates for the group members with employers in the community and provides case management, making this type of group different from traditional career counseling groups. Sufficient details to replicate the group are provided along with resources and follow-up suggestions.

Keywords: *advocacy; group counseling; Job Club; social justice; unemployed adults*

As a result of the recent economic downturn in the United States and globally, unemployment is projected to be at the highest levels in the coming years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS; 2010a) reported that in May 2010, the number of unemployed persons in the United States was 14.9 million (9.7% of the population). According to the BLS, unemployment in the major ethnic groups in the United States was as follows: Blacks = 15.8%, Hispanics = 12.4%, Whites = 8.8%, and Asians = 8.4%. The reported unemployment rate for teens was 25% (BLS, 2010a). Adults who experience long-term unemployment (those unemployed for 27 weeks or more according to the BLS) are likely to have even greater difficulty in obtaining suitable paid work in times of economic crises. In May 2010, the number of long-term unemployed adults in the United States was reported to be 6.1 million (BLS, 2010a).

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Providing assistance to the unemployed is imperative from a social justice perspective. Failure to do so could result in a cycle of economic and social disempowerment for unemployed individuals and their families. Grounded in McWhirter's (1994) definition of empowerment, interventions for the unemployed should help clients become aware of the power dynamics in their life, develop their skills and capacity to regain some control, exercise that control without infringing on the rights of others, and support the empowerment of others in the community. Blustein (2006) presented the psychology of work perspective, noting that career counseling has tended to neglect the experiences of individuals who have been socially oppressed due to race, class, disability, immigrant status, sexual orientation, age, gender, poverty, or lack of access to resources. Blustein advocated more inclusive psychological practice by fostering both empowerment and critical consciousness. In an extension of this work, Blustein, Kenna, Gill, and DeVoy (2008) have suggested promoting skill-building for the changing workforce, and using "scaffolding," or multiple levels of intervention, including individual counseling, case management, and social advocacy. These authors suggest that this last element is essential when assisting clients who are not White, middle-class, male, and educated (Blustein et al., 2008).

According to Sweeney (1998), Alfred Adler maintained that "work" is a central and fundamental life task faced by human beings. Failure in the life task of work tends to result in the most highly discouraged and disheartened individuals in society (Sweeney, 1998, p. 17). Targeted and efficacious interventions that are grounded in appropriate social advocacy models and embedded in local communities are essential to create opportunities for the long-term unemployed. These interventions help provide clients with skills and support to find work, address internal and external barriers, and simultaneously advocate for the unemployed with employers in the local community and orient the unemployed to retraining in growth sectors of the economy.

Interventions delivered in groups rather than to individuals have benefits for participants. These include gaining support from members of the group and providing opportunities to learn by observing and modeling the job search skills of members and leaders. Many of the therapeutic factors of groups (Yalom, 1995) are present in this intervention and they contribute to successful outcomes for participants.

The group described in this article is an updated version of a group intervention for unemployed adults previously led by the author in an urban area of a major Australian city. The communities in which the

groups were offered were characterized by high racial and ethnic diversity and low socioeconomic status with an approximate 10% unemployment rate. The group intervention programs were funded federally, and services were delivered by the Salvation Army, a private, non-profit, religious organization. In times of high unemployment, the numbers of people who can be assisted by government-run programs is limited. Funding programs through non-profit organizations at the community level enables a larger number of disadvantaged individuals to be served.

The group intervention described combines elements of the Job Club approach, a behavioral intervention for assisting unemployed clients (Azrin & Besalel, 1980), with a focus on personal and career self-awareness, as well as on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Job Clubs are based on the premise that people who are looking for work benefit by "doing" rather than by listening or taking a more passive stance. In a highly structured format, clients are taught and practice specific job search skills such as writing resumes and cover letters, making calls to employers, responding to advertisements, handling interviews, and following up after an interview. Simulation activities, such as role plays, are used, and group members are given extensive feedback, including video feedback. Group facilitators tend to be active and directive, supporting and encouraging members, and fostering an environment in which members support each other. Research supports the effectiveness of Job Clubs in assisting clients find work (Bikos & Furry, 1999; Rutter & Jones, 2007; Sterrett, 1998; Stidham & Remley, 1992).

In addition to the Job Club element, the group intervention focuses on building self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Sterrett (1998) reported that clients with higher levels of self-efficacy engaged in more job search behaviors and had more positive employment outcomes. The group plan also incorporates activities designed to enhance personal and career self-awareness and understanding, including strengths, limitations, and internal and external barriers. Group members are thus required to engage intrapersonally as well as interpersonally.

OVERVIEW OF THE GROUP INTERVENTION

The group is designed for 10–12 members and meets for three consecutive weeks, Monday through Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with an hour off for lunch. Emphasis is placed on empowerment (Blustein, 2006; McWhirter, 1994), critical consciousness (Blustein), and skill development with scaffolding of interventions at the group and individual level, combined with case management and advocacy (Blustein et al., 2008).

Week One focuses on issues of grief, loss, self-esteem, and self-efficacy more than actual job seeking tasks. Leaders place an emphasis on fostering some of the therapeutic factors shown to be important in group work, such as the instillation of hope, universality, cohesion, socialization, feedback, and imitative behavior (Yalom, 1995). In Weeks Two and Three, there is an increased focus on teaching, developing, and using job-search skills and behaviors. In addition to services provided to job-seekers, case management and advocacy are provided—by an employer liaison who visits local employers to facilitate the hiring of group members, by access to community partners who provide resources and training options, and by referrals to services such as food banks, benefits offices, or low cost housing.

Pre-Group Screening, Orientation, and Goals

Participants should be provided with a thorough orientation of the services offered and the expectations that will be placed on them before they join the group. Participants unwilling to commit to the time required or those who present as unsuited to work in groups should be screened out. The goals of the group are to provide participants with a safe environment in which to: (a) discuss and process how unemployment has affected them personally; (b) understand and enhance self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy; (c) explore interests, values, and personality as it relates to the world of work; (d) interact with and provide reciprocal support to others who are in a similar situation and facing similar stresses; (e) learn and practice job search skills; (f) identify retraining or career redirection options, if necessary; (g) gain access to community supports; and (h) face the future with an increased sense of empowerment, career self-efficacy, and hope.

A more detailed description of group activities and interventions in each week is provided following. Each day is structured in such a way that at least one 90-minute group counseling session takes place. The description of Week One is the most detailed because in Weeks Two and Three, the focus is more on Job Club type of activities (Azrin & Besalel, 1980), including career exploration tasks and job search training.

For a group of 10–12 clients, co-leadership is recommended as this enables leaders to adequately serve the diverse needs of group members during group interventions and permits provision of one-on-one assistance as needed. It is vital for leaders to set a warm, inclusive, helpful, and hopeful tone from the beginning. Leaders should have

expertise in career counseling, and should be skilled in engaging and utilizing community resources and partners. They should be familiar with online resources, such as "Career One Stop" (2010), that provide information on employment, training, and finances for adults in career transition.

Detailed Description of Group Intervention

Initial activities include welcoming the group; introducing group facilitators, support staff, and group members; collaboratively developing group rules; explaining program requirements and expectations; providing information on what services are available (e.g., access to computers and the Internet, secretarial services, free phone calls, stationery, and postage); and outlining what behaviors are permitted or not permitted (such as using computers for social interaction). Members write pride stories by responding to the prompt: "When I look back on my life (personal, education, leisure, and work), what events or memories do I remember with a sense of pride?" The group counseling session on the first day is based on this topic, enabling members to focus on being "more than" their work or lack thereof. The afternoon session ends with a brief talk (during the last hour) by a former participant who has successfully found work. This serves to begin the process of empowerment (Blustein, 2006; McWhirter, 1994) and the instillation of hope (Yalom, 1995).

During Day Two, the group explores issues of loss and grief related to their job loss or lack of job success to normalize such feelings. Through this retelling of "stories," and through processing negative thoughts and emotions related to job loss or unemployment, participants gain a sense of universality (Yalom, 1995). Group members explore interests and skills using online career decision-making tools on America's Career Resource Network (ACRN; n.d.). Members examine lists of possible jobs that match their profile of interests and skills. They are encouraged to research jobs with which they are unfamiliar by referring to online resources, such as the Occupational Outlook Handbook (BLS, 2010b), America's Career Infonet (2010), or ACRN (n.d.). These resources provide current information on jobs, such as training required, earnings, anticipated growth projections, and the exact nature of the tasks for each job.

On Day Three, the group discusses the effects of job loss or unemployment on self- concept and self-esteem, and members learn and practice ways in which cognitive therapy techniques (Beck, 1995) can be used to alter distorted thinking. Using a film clip depicting job loss and the psychological toll it takes can be useful to get the discussion started (see for example, Pasolini & Cattaneo, 1997).

Participants take a values card sort exercise and prioritize values that are important in their work lives. The facilitators lead a discussion on these values, and the importance of them to each participant.

On Day Four, the focus is on self-efficacy, and its role in successful work and life outcomes. Participants take the Career Search Self-Efficacy Scale, which measures self-efficacy in job search, networking, interviewing, and personal exploration (Solberg et al., 1994). Participants' scores help the group facilitators identify and intervene in specific areas of the job search process where participants report low career self-efficacy. The facilitators administer and score The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Form M (Briggs Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998), and discuss with group members individual strengths and possible challenges linked to personality and the job-search process.

The final day of Week One begins with a group discussion on self-worth, once again drawing on cognitive therapy (Beck, 1995) to identify and modify cognitive distortions, such as generalizations. The group explores critical consciousness (Blustein, 2006) as participants discuss experiences of oppression, marginalization, and systemic barriers to employment. The group spends time writing affirmations of their worth and are encouraged to write these on index cards and post them in places they will look at often. The week closes with participants reflecting on the week and discussing strategies to identify positions next week.

In Weeks Two and Three, the focus is on skill-building in job search tasks (Azrin & Besalel, 1980), and on advocacy and case management (Blustein et al., 2008). During this skill-building phase, the group is utilized to provide feedback and to proofread job application materials, which can be empowering as members see how they can help others in the group. In addition to time spent together for group instruction or group counseling, participants are expected to work individually to begin applying for suitable jobs. By this stage, each group member should be well aware of fellow members' employment goals and they are encouraged to share potential job leads with each other. This begins the process of networking that is so vital to the success of a job club. Therapeutic factors that contribute to the success of a group (Yalom, 1995) during this phase include imparting of information, developing cohesiveness, and altruism. Clerical support is offered to all who need it, and job application costs including printing, copying, and postage are covered. Visits from local employers or career agencies are arranged, either to conduct interviews for open positions or "mock" interviews, or to provide an employer's perspective on aspects of the job search process.

Group counseling sessions focus on topics such as assertiveness, confidence, and verbal and non-verbal communication. The group

explores internal and external barriers to progress, and discusses strategies to address them. Therapeutic factors (Yalom, 1995), such as giving and receiving feedback and interpersonal learning, are fostered. On the last day of Week Two, the group visits a local second-hand clothing store to shop for possible interview attire. In support of the program, the store periodically runs a collection drive for appropriate interview clothing.

During the final week of the program, participants focus on sending out applications and attending interviews if they obtain them. Advocacy efforts with local employers continue by promoting the advantages of hiring group members and offering to assist with their transition. Members who return from job sites or interviews debrief with the entire group, sharing their impressions; successful placements are celebrated. Former members who obtain positions advocate for current members in the program at their work sites and serve as important sources of job leads. The group members continue to support each other and to be invested in successful outcomes. Members thus feel empowered to do more and not be held back by their fears. Facilitators emphasize that although the group is drawing to a close, support will continue as needed. On the last day, the group shares a meal together, celebrating life, friendships, new attitudes, and positive outcomes—now or in the near future.

Follow-Up Services

It is necessary for the program to continue to provide follow-up services for a relatively lengthy period of time, such as three to six months. These services consist of individual counseling or mentoring, as needed, along with assistance with the cost of looking for work. Continued advocacy for group members with local employers is essential, and can be accomplished by providing sound recommendations for members and by offering assistance with transition services. Equally important in times of economic transition are efforts to provide up-to-date information on retraining in projected growth areas (for example, jobs related to alternative energy sources), and in encouraging members who are unable to find work to consider alternative job paths.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LEADER IMPRESSIONS

Tracking outcomes is an essential task for leaders, and serves the dual purpose of (a) strengthening future funding bids, and (b) expanding the advocacy network of leaders, as former members who

are placed in jobs are often willing to help current participants. Documenting quantitative and qualitative feedback helps leaders capitalize on the strengths of the program and address weaknesses. Leaders should regularly debrief with each other in order to avoid burnout.

Along with assistance and information, care and concern shown by group leaders and the community is invaluable. Mobilizing local involvement is vital because unemployment has ripple effects on the entire community. Making unemployed clients feel visible and valued helps them through a difficult phase. The sense of satisfaction group leaders experience from helping a client move toward empowerment is rewarding. Long-term unemployed individuals can soon become unemployable if effective interventions are not available to them. This possibility is an untenable outcome for a society that values social justice.

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Professional School Counselors as Social Justice Advocates for Undocumented Immigrant Students in Group Work

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Due to cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as a fear of deportation, undocumented immigrant students have remained an invisible group face in the existing school system. We provide specific strategies for school counselors to consider in advocating social justice and in facilitating empowerment of undocumented immigrant students through group work. A case vignette is presented to highlight challenges confronting undocumented immigrants and to offer strategies for school counselors as specialists in group work to address the unique educational and psychological needs of undocumented immigrant students.

Keywords: *change agent; professional school counselor; school counseling; social justice; undocumented immigrant students*

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the role of school counselors as agents of change in advocating for social justice for marginalized students (Bemak & Chung, 2008). Social justice involves promoting an equal distribution of resources among members of society and eliminating institutionalized oppression (Speight & Vera, 2004). Such perspectives seek to achieve structural transformation at a systemic level rather than limiting psychological interventions at the individual level (Chen, in press). Group counseling, with its therapeutic power of instillation of hope, universality, and imparting of information (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), provides a potent milieu for promoting lasting social change.

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