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Key words: unemployed; mental health; Jobs programme

Introduction

The negative impact of economic recessions on the mental health of individuals and families is well documented. Research indicates that the current economic downturn is exposing more people to known risk factors for mental health problems, including unemployment and other major life changes (Dorling, 2009), poverty (Aznar, 2009), unanticipated disruptions in income (Aznar, 2009), debt, financial strain, and uncertain and increasingly stressful work environments (Fitch *et al*, 2009). In its communication *Driving European Recovery* the European

Commission (2009) highlighted the need to support people through the current economic crisis and reduce its impact on their mental health and well-being. The document urges Member States to focus their priority actions on four measures designed to reduce the human cost of the crisis: maintaining jobs, ensuring rapid re-integration into the labour market, investing in social and health infrastructure, and supporting the most vulnerable and strengthening social protection. Yet with regard to unemployment, very few programmes have been identified or evaluated which have the specific goals of improving coping skills and promoting mental health and general functioning (Creed *et al*, 1999; Vesalainen & Vuori, 1999). Very few studies have evaluated the psychological outcomes of

A B S T R A C T

This paper reports on the evaluation of the JOBS programme (Caplan et al, 1989), an evidence-based intervention designed to promote re-employment and improve the mental health of the unemployed. While previous evaluations have examined the programme's effects on the recently unemployed, this study examines the programme with a mixed profile of participants, including those long-term unemployed. The JOBS programme was adapted as the Winning New Jobs (WNJ) programme and implemented in the Republic and North of

Ireland. It employs a quasi-experimental design, and programme outcomes included re-employment, general and mental health, and job search behaviour followed up over 12 months. The programme has produced positive long-term results, particularly with regard to re-employment. Specifically, 47.7% of the intervention group were employed compared with 16.8% of the comparison group ($p < 0.001$) at the one-year follow-up. WNJ also had a positive effect on reducing economic hardship and enhancing inoculation against setbacks.

training-based interventions for the unemployed (Creed *et al.*, 1999). This paper reports on a study which addresses this gap, and presents the findings from the evaluation of an evidence-based job search programme for the unemployed, focusing in detail on the programme effects on re-employment and mental health outcomes at 12-month follow-up.

In a recent economic survey, the OECD (2009) stated that unemployment is expected to increase significantly in many economies, including the United Kingdom and Ireland, which are experiencing a severe recession. In Ireland, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) stated that the standardised unemployment rate had reached 12.2% (adjusted for seasonality) in July 2009 (CSO, 2009). Long-term unemployment is of growing concern for many people. The long-term unemployed are conventionally defined as those who have been continuously unemployed for at least a year (Thomsen, 2009). In Ireland in 2007, the long-term unemployed made up 30.3% of the total unemployed (OECD, 2009). Some countries in the OECD have more than 50% of their unemployed classed as long-term unemployed, for example Germany in 2007 (OECD, 2009). Much research indicates that levels of unemployment are much higher than official figures state, including, for example, the hidden unemployed (Creed *et al.*, 2009). They include older workers who have stopped looking for work because they no longer believe they will get a job.

Several reviews and meta-analyses have been published that summarise and integrate the results of nearly a century of research on the psychological effects of unemployment (for example Hanisch, 1999; Kasl *et al.*, 1998; McKee-Ryan *et al.*, 2005; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Winefield, 1995). These meta-analyses paint a picture of a highly stable negative effect of unemployment on mental health that is moderated by few, if any, other variables (Paul & Moser, 2009). Specifically, research has shown that those who are unemployed often experience feelings of anxiety, depression, uncertainty about the future, anger, shame and loss of self-esteem following job loss (Murphy & Athanasou, 1999). Indeed Paul and Moser (2009) concluded from their meta-analysis that unemployment is a serious threat to mental health. It has also been found that the negative effects of unemployment on mental health are larger among the long-term unemployed (>6 months) than the short-term unemployed (McKee-Ryan *et al.*, 2005).

Long-term unemployment can affect anyone, but is more common among older people (over 45), low-skilled people, those who have been made redundant and those with long-term health problems (OECD, 2001). Generally those unemployed longest report the greatest degree of psychological distress (Murphy & Athanasou, 1999). Previous research supports this by indicating that demotivation becomes more significant after two years or more of prolonged

unemployment (Gregg, 1991). Some researchers have proposed that the long-term unemployed might experience 'job search fatigue', which is exhaustion from looking for work for an extended period (Fletcher, 1998). Individuals may become habituated to ongoing unemployment and develop lifestyles that further reduce their chances of re-employment (Van den Berg & Van der Veer, 1992). The long-term unemployed are sometimes regarded as 'unemployable' by employers, as they are perceived to have lost contact with labour markets, as well as not having the skills required by the demands of the fast-changing labour environment, and being generally less able to adapt to the changing socio-economic situation (Machin & Manning, 1999). Finally, the longer a person is out of work, the more difficult it is for them to re-enter the workforce (OECD, 2001).

Studies show that re-employment can reverse the adverse mental health effects that occur with unemployment, and that re-employment in a satisfactory job restores psychosocial functioning to previous levels (Vuori & Vesalainen, 1999). To lower the risk of long-term unemployment and to reduce the level of unemployment, governments in many OECD countries offer various active labour market programmes (Thomsen, 2009). These focus on particular sets of barriers to employment such as lack of motivation (via sanctions), lack of experience (via wage subsidies), lack of marketable skills (via training programmes) and lack of job search skills (via job search assistance) (Thomsen, 2009). Active labour market programmes are an important element of the functioning of labour markets in most European countries, while in the US they are less prevalent (Thomsen, 2009). It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that the practice of evaluating these programmes is much less developed in Europe than in the US (Kluve & Schmidt, 2002; Kluve, 2006). Often job search training is an adaptation of some programme or a compiled mixture of many programmes, or lacks specific theoretical foundation (Vuori *et al.*, 2005).

The JOBS programme

An example of an evidence-based job search programme is the JOBS Intervention Project, which was developed as a preventative intervention for the recently unemployed (Caplan *et al.*, 1989; Vinokur & Schul, 1997). This programme targets job loss as one of the most consistent antecedents of depression (Price, 1992). The JOBS programme is designed to aid unemployed workers to seek re-employment and cope with the multiple challenges and stresses of unemployment and job search (Caplan *et al.*, 1997). The intervention goals are to prevent the deterioration in mental health of unemployed people which often results from job loss and prolonged

unemployment, and to promote high-quality re-employment.

The JOBS programme consists of five intensive half-day training workshops (20 hours) held over a one to two week period. Pairs of male and female trainers work with groups of 12–22 unemployed people. Essentially, the programme has five principal components:

- active teaching and learning methods, as opposed to didactic passive learning, using the knowledge and skills of the participants themselves elicited through small- and large-group discussions, role-playing exercises and other activities (Caplan *et al*, 1997)
- skilled trainers, who have been trained specifically to deliver the JOBS programme
- supportive learning environments, in which the trainers model and reinforce supportive behaviour so participants can learn from and support each other
- self-efficacy: training processes that enhance general confidence, sense of control and job-related self-efficacy for participants (for example increasing one's belief that one has the necessary skills to find a suitable job)
- inoculation against setbacks; for the benefits of the training to persist over time, participants are coached in planning for and dealing with setbacks and obstacles.

Previous studies of the JOBS programme

The intervention was originally tested by two large randomised field studies, JOBS I and II (Caplan *et al*, 1989; van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur *et al*, 1991). Both these studies were conducted with recently unemployed people in the USA. The average length of unemployment in these studies was 13 weeks (s.d. = 9 weeks) and 4.11 weeks (s.d. = 3.8 weeks) respectively. With a follow-up period of two and a half years post-intervention, the programme produced positive results. Those in the experimental group achieved significantly better employment outcomes, in terms of better quality and higher-paying jobs (Vinokur *et al*, 1991). They also reported improved mental health from enhanced role and emotional functioning and reduced depressive symptoms (Vinokur *et al*, 1995a).

A cost-benefit analysis of the JOBS intervention was conducted which showed that the total net gain for the average participant in the experimental group amounted to \$5392 at the end of 2.5 years. Not only did the benefits of the programme exceed all costs within less than two years, but also the higher wage earnings that persisted at long-term follow-up suggest that the benefits should continue for many years. The experimental group's higher tax contributions (from higher wages), coupled with their lower use of unemployment benefit, suggest that there are notable net economic benefits

for the state as well (Vinokur *et al*, 1991).

Subsequent research explored the mediating mechanisms of the JOBS interventions. These analyses highlighted that job search self-efficacy, sense of mastery and inoculation against setbacks emerged as significant mediators of the intervention effects on re-employment, financial strain and depressive symptoms (Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur & Schul, 1997). Inoculation against setbacks during the intervention has been demonstrated to protect future mental health during temporary unemployment spells (Vinokur & Schul, 1997).

Both American studies of the JOBS programme involved those recently unemployed and so the results may not generalise to the long-term unemployed. The Työhön Job Search Programme is a Finnish version of the JOBS programme (Vuori *et al*, 2002; Vuori & Silvonen, 2005) which examined the programme in the context of a European labour market for individuals who had been unemployed for a longer period (mean = 10.7 months). At the two-year follow-up, significantly more of the experimental group were re-employed, in subsidised work or in vocational training (70.4%) than the control group (64.1%). The experimental group also reported significantly decreased depressive symptoms and increased self-esteem in comparison with the controls (Vuori & Silvonen, 2005).

The Winning New Jobs Programme in Ireland

The implementation of the JOBS programme in Ireland, known as Winning New Jobs, has been previously described elsewhere (Barry *et al*, 2006). It included discussing issues that arose in adapting an international programme to a local setting and the implications for the roll-out of the programme on a larger scale.

The Winning New Jobs (WNJ) programme was piloted as part of the Cross-Border Rural Mental Health Project (Barry *et al*, 2006; Reynolds *et al*, 2004; Reynolds, 2007), a wider community-based initiative concerned with promoting positive mental health and well-being in cross-border rural communities. As one of a wide range of community interventions, the programme viewed the unemployed as a key target group that would benefit from a positive mental health intervention. The WNJ programme was implemented in two jurisdictions in the cross-border areas of Counties Donegal and Derry/Londonderry and in parts of the North-West, including counties Sligo and Leitrim – all areas known for their high unemployment levels. The project involved the partnership of multiple agencies in the training, employment and health sectors. The Michigan Prevention Research Center (MPRC) also agreed to work collaboratively in replicating the programme in Ireland, training the trainers, and providing data collection measures and advice on implementation and evaluation.

Objectives

The overall objective of this study was to evaluate the WNJ programme implementation with a mixed profile of unemployed individuals, particularly those who were long-term unemployed. It involved comparing the outcomes for the participants of the WNJ programme with those for people who did not participate in the programme but had received standard training courses (the comparison group) at the 12-month follow-up.

Specifically it was predicted that the intervention group would have:

- enhanced job search behaviour (job search activities, job-seeking efficacy and job search motivation)
- increased probability of re-employment
- reduced economic hardship
- enhanced general health and psychological well-being (regarding depressive symptoms, sense of mastery and inoculation against setbacks).

Method

Study design including sample

The study employed a quasi-experimental design. The participants in the WNJ programme (the intervention group) were selected from those attending the local training and employment agencies. A randomised intervention was not possible because the agencies were not prepared to give the researchers access to their database of those unemployed. The agencies insisted on selecting the participants, focusing on those regarded as difficult to place for inclusion in the WNJ intervention. These 'difficult-to-place' individuals (Fletcher, 1998) include the long-term unemployed and possibly those caught in a vicious circle that limits the potential of training interventions. The comparison group was recruited by the researchers from the same agencies as the intervention group. The comparison group consisted of unemployed individuals who were not participating in the programme, but were availing themselves of standard training opportunities. The comparison and intervention groups were matched only in being recruited from the same training and employment offices in the same catchment areas.

In determining the total sample, the following selection criteria were fulfilled for each individual:

- unemployed
- age between 18 and 65 years
- being 'opportunity ready', that is, ready to commence employment, voluntary work or training.

Measures

The measures assessing programme impact and outcomes were quantitative measures using multi-item questions, based on those used in previous studies of the JOBS programme. The measures included details of socio-demographics and past employment as well as re-employment outcomes. See *Table 1*, below, for details of the pre-post measures used.

Procedure

Baseline questionnaires were administered to both intervention and comparison groups. Questionnaires were also administered to both groups at the 12-month follow-up. The intervention group completed questionnaires immediately at the end of training. All evaluation materials were piloted and approved for readability by a local adult literacy organisation. Ethical approval for the study was obtained, and permission to administer the questionnaires was negotiated and agreed with the WNJ Planning Group and the relevant training and employment agencies.

Adaptation of the manual

The JOBS manual for teaching people successful job search strategies (Curran *et al*, 1999) provides a structured guide for implementing the programme, including the steps necessary for setting up and delivering the programme. After the piloting of the materials, the manual content was adapted very slightly from its American origins to suit an Irish audience. These minor changes consisted of the use of language and examples more suited to the Irish context, as reported previously (Barry *et al*, 2006).

TABLE 1 *Details of the Key Pre-Post Measures Used (Including Reliability Analysis)*

Variable	Source	No. of items	<i>r</i> *
Depressive symptoms	Derogatis <i>et al</i> (1974)	11	0.92
Sense of mastery	Pearlin <i>et al</i> (1981)	7	0.66
Inoculation against setbacks	Meichenbaum (1985) Janis (1982) Janis & Mann (1977) [†]	4	0.64
Economic hardship	Kessler <i>et al</i> (1988) Vinokur & Caplan (1987)	3	0.86
Job search activities	Vuori & Tervahartiala (1995)	6	0.80
Job-seeking efficacy	Vinokur <i>et al</i> (1995b)	5	0.88
Job search motivation	Ajzen & Fishbein (1980) [†]	7	0.59

* Reliability Coefficient

[†] These measures are based on the work of these authors.

Data collection

Potential participants were provided with information by the agencies and asked whether they wished to participate in the study. Assurances were given to all study participants that participation was completely voluntary and all information would be treated as strictly confidential. Follow-up questionnaires were posted to the entire sample at the 12-month follow-up. Every effort was made to maximise response rates in accordance with Dillman's Total Design Method (Calahan & Schumm, 1995), and included use of stamped addressed return envelopes, reminders and entry into a prize draw for €100 (or £75) cash.

Data analysis

The programme outcomes were examined by regression analyses, as in previous studies. Logistic regression was used for dichotomous dependent variables and multiple linear regression for continuous variables.

Results

Participant profile

Of the total sample who returned baseline questionnaires, 162 (93.1%) from the intervention group and 190 (95.96%) from the comparison group were valid and used for data analysis. The remainder were deemed unusable for data analysis due to missing data. One possible reason for this was the length of the questionnaires (more than 50 questions per questionnaire).

At baseline, the intervention and comparison groups differed significantly with regard to gender and length of unemployment. The intervention group contained a significantly higher percentage of females, and length of unemployment was also greater in the intervention group. The intervention and comparison groups differed significantly at baseline on the following three measures: job-seeking efficacy, job search activities and inoculation against setbacks. On all three measures the comparison group reported the highest levels. More details of the sample at baseline are included in *Tables 2* and *3*, below.

Programme outcomes

With regard to re-employment, the percentage of WNJ participants re-employed increased from zero at baseline to 47.7% at 12-month follow-up ($p < 0.001$), while the comparison group overall reported significantly less re-employment, with 16.8% re-employed after one year. Related to the increased

TABLE 2 Socio-Demographic and Employment Related Profile of the Sample at Baseline

Variable	Group:	
	Intervention (N = 162)	Comparison (N = 190)
Gender (%)***		
Female	70.4	48.9
Male	29.6	51.1
Age		
Mean age, years (s.d.)	34.77 (11.78)	33.02 (10.87)
Age range, years	18–63	18–60
Socioeconomic group (%)		
Professional	0.9	1.9
Managerial and technical	13.7	14.8
Non-manual	28.2	30.9
Skilled manual	20.5	18.5
Semi-skilled	30.8	27.8
Unskilled/other	5.9	6.1
Level of education (%)		
No schooling/primary school only	8.2	5.6
Some secondary education	31.6	28.5
Complete secondary education	34.2	29.1
Some third-level education	13.3	12.7
Completed third-level education	19.0	17.8
Employment		
Mean length of unemployment in years (s.d.)**	5.06 (5.80)	3.09 (4.05)
Unemployment range	1 week–25 yrs	1 week–30 yrs
Mean length of time in previous job in years (s.d.)	5.15 (6.58)	5.20 (6.73)
Mean weekly wage rate in previous job in Euro (s.d.)	261.64 (200.77)	324.89 (264.45)

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE 3 Profile of the Intervention and Comparison Groups at Baseline: General and Mental Health, Economic Hardship and Employment-Related Variables

Variable	Group:	
	Intervention (N = 162)	Comparison (N = 190)
	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)
General health (scale of 1–5)	2.51 (1.15)	2.63 (1.02)
Economic hardship (scale of 1–5)	2.78 (1.11)	2.68 (0.96)
Job-seeking efficacy (scale of 1–5)**	2.90 (0.88)	3.18 (0.97)
Job search activities (scale of 1–4)***	1.86 (0.75)	2.17 (0.84)
Depressive symptoms (scale of 1–5)	1.81 (0.82)	1.79 (0.73)
Sense of mastery (scale of 1–4)	2.24 (0.48)	2.18 (0.46)
Inoculation against setbacks (scale of 1–5)**	3.10 (0.74)	3.33 (0.82)

Note: higher scores on each measure indicate more of the variable (except for general health and mastery).
** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

probability of re-employment, the intervention group showed a general trend towards reduced economic hardship over time. At the one-year follow-up they reported significantly less economic hardship than the comparison group ($p < 0.01$). The intervention group also showed increased inoculation

against setbacks over time (ability to deal with difficulties in job search efforts). At the 12-month follow-up this effect was significant ($p < 0.05$).

The first part of this section on programme impact displays the descriptive statistics for the intervention and comparison groups at the 12 month follow-up, shown in **Table 4**, below. The second part of the results shows the results of the regression analyses. **Table 5**, overleaf, shows the regression coefficients and adjusted explained variances from these analyses. The results in the first row of the table demonstrate that the WNJ programme had a significant positive impact on the programme participants.

Discussion

With a follow-up period of one year, the WNJ programme implemented in both the Republic and the North of Ireland has produced positive long-term results, particularly with regard to re-employment. This advantage of more than 30% in the intervention group (versus the comparison group) persisted at the 12-month follow-up. It is noteworthy that, while the comparison group were long-term unemployed at baseline (with a mean unemployment of over three years), the intervention group had been unemployed for significantly longer (mean of over five years). Following the WNJ programme the participants were more likely to experience reduced economic hardship and to report enhanced ability to deal with setbacks than the comparison group. These positive results existed even though the intervention group reported significantly lower levels of inoculation against setbacks than the comparison group at baseline.

It is noteworthy that the programme lasts just 20 hours and yet was capable of having such a positive impact on a mixed

group of individuals, particularly those who were long-term unemployed. These positive outcomes for participants have persisted over time. This is important, since it contrasts with much of the research on job search assistance, which reports that benefits following interventions do not always persist for the unemployed (Creed *et al*, 1996; Creed, 1998). One reason may be the effect of the psychosocial training climate. Creed and his colleagues examined this in relation to mental health outcomes for long-term unemployed individuals and found that supportive and encouraging interpersonal relationships between trainer and trainee (the training environment) were associated with better well-being, and that these improvements persisted over time. The practical implications are that, if training environments are not created which are conducive to improvements in mental health, then the positive effects of interventions may not last.

As discussed previously, the process evaluation data indicate that the evidence-based JOBS programme was implemented as intended and with high fidelity (Barry *et al*, 2006). The programme was rated positively from the various perspectives of trainers, training participants and independent observers (Barry *et al*, 2006). It is therefore reasonable to conclude, based on previous research (Vinokur *et al*, 1995b; Vuori & Tervahartala, 1995), that the good delivery of this programme has contributed to the positive outcomes found in the present study. Following the intervention there were significantly higher levels of perseverance among participants (despite setbacks), which may help explain why the positive effects of the intervention persisted over time. Previous international research indicates that the JOBS programme can be implemented cost-effectively (Vinokur *et al*, 1991). In Ireland, efforts were made to reduce costs by implementing the JOBS programme as a community-based initiative, involving close collaboration of multiple statutory, voluntary and community groups.

For meaningful comparison with the previous studies of the JOBS programme, this study used many of the same evaluation measures (Caplan *et al*, 1989; van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur *et al*, 1991). The present findings on re-employment are similar to those found with the JOBS programme internationally. As more of the intervention group are re-employed, they are likely to pay more tax and draw less unemployment benefit, so there are economic gains both for the individuals themselves and their families, and for the wider community (Vinokur *et al*, 1991). Most important, in contrast with previous studies the WNJ programme in Ireland was implemented with a group that had been unemployed for longer than in any of the previous studies. The average length of unemployment among the Irish sample was over five years, while internationally it was less than one year.

The additional benefits reported for participants in this

TABLE 4 *Descriptive Statistics for Key Outcomes for the Intervention and Comparison Groups at the 12-month Follow-up*

Key Outcome	Group:	
	Intervention (N = 95) Mean (sd)	Comparison (N = 102) Mean (sd)
Job search activities (scale of 1–4)	1.90 (0.71)	1.96 (0.58)
Job-seeking efficacy (scale of 1–5)	3.33 (0.89)	3.27 (0.95)
Job search motivation (scale of 1–7)	3.73 (0.75)	3.76 (0.64)
General health (scale of 1–5)	2.48 (1.13)	2.38 (1.05)
Sense of mastery (scale of 1–4)	2.26 (0.48)	2.22 (0.57)
Inoculation against setbacks (scale of 1–5)	3.52 (0.69)	3.27 (0.85)
Depressive symptoms (scale of 1–5)	1.90 (0.89)	1.81 (0.79)
Economic hardship (scale of 1–5)	2.40 (1.10)	2.76 (1.05)
% Re-employed	47.7	16.8

Note: higher scores on each measure indicate more of the variable (except for general health and mastery).

TABLE 5 *Effect of the WNJ Programme and Baseline Predictors on Key Outcomes at 12-month Follow-up*

Baseline predictors	Re-employment	General health	Depressive symptoms	Sense of mastery	Inoculation against setbacks	Economic hardship	Job search activities	Job seeking efficacy	Job search motivation
Group (1 = Intervention, 0 = Comparison)	2.49***	-.04	-.05	-.03	-.18*	.21**	-.02	-.12	-.01
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	-.65	.00	-.06	-.21*	.13	-.04	.04	.08	.08
Age	.04	-.08	-.06	-.06	.08	-.26**	-.15	-.10	-.08
Education (1, 0)	-.22	-.02	-.06	-.05	-.06	-.04	-.10	-.07	-.05
Marital status (1 = Married, 0 = Single)	-.13	.06	.00	.09	.03	.10	.05	.09	-.05
Length of unemployment	.00*	.10	.05	.19*	-.02	.17 [†]	.08	-.09	.03
General health	.22	.55***	.07	.13	-.02	-.06	-.13	-.14	-.17
Depressive symptoms	-.21	.08	.62***	.33***	-.03	-.02	.08	-.14	-.01
Mastery	-.87	.09	.05	.18*	-.06	-.02	.06	.01	.02
Inoculation against setbacks	-.17	-.06	.04	-.01	.25**	.08	.03	.06	.14
Economic hardship	-.17	.07	.05	.07	-.02	.51***	.07	-.06	.07
Job search activities	-.13	-.04	.01	.01	.08	.02	.51***	.09	.27**
Job-seeking efficacy	.37	.05	-.04	-.08	.00	-.15 [†]	-.01	.38***	-.02
<i>N</i>	121	196	196	197	197	196	197	197	187
R²	.32 ^a	.41	.49	.34	.11	.37	.32	.31	.16
Adjusted R²	.05 ^b	.35***	.43***	.28***	.02	.31***	.25***	.24***	.07 [†]

Key outcomes = re-employment, general health, depressive symptoms, sense of mastery, inoculation against setbacks, economic hardship, job search activities, job-seeking efficacy and job search motivation.

All values are standardised linear regression coefficients (beta) except for the outcome re-employment (logistic regression coefficients).

Education: 0 = some secondary, 1 = complete secondary or higher. Marital status: married includes cohabiting

** p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, [†]p<0.10.*

^a = r (logistic regression), ^b = r² (logistic regression).

study are consistent with previous findings from evaluations of the JOBS programme. Previous studies highlighted that inoculation against setbacks was a significant mediator of the intervention effects (Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur & Schul, 1997). In particular, inoculation against setbacks as part of the intervention has been demonstrated to protect mental health during future unemployment (Vinokur & Schul, 1997). Economic hardship has also been found to be a crucial mediator between unemployment and adverse outcomes (Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). Overall, this study underlines the important role of protective factors (such as inoculation against setbacks), as well as risk factors (for example economic hardship).

Mental health promotion in a wider context

While this intervention is aimed specifically at enhancing job search skills, it also incorporates several general mental health promotion elements, including enhancing participants' sense of control, increasing their confidence, and fortifying resistance and persistence in the face of setbacks and barriers. The programme engenders a positive attitude and a problem-solving approach which reduce negative thinking. The psychological benefits of these aspects of the programme, combined with the support and reinforcement received during the group training, appear to help participants develop valuable skills and improved confidence, which may

extend beyond the training intervention. The programme clearly has mental health promotion benefits in addition to enhancing skills that are specific to job searching and re-employment.

Study limitations

A number of limitations must be taken into account when interpreting the findings of this study.

The findings are subject to alternative interpretations, because of the study design. First, there are problems associated with the use of a quasi-experimental design, as the WNJ participants were selected by the agencies, at their insistence, rather than being randomly selected, so selection bias is possible. However, it is clear from the demographic profiles that members of the intervention group were more likely to be long-term unemployed than those in the comparison group. The employment and training agencies were keen to select for inclusion in the WNJ intervention the long-term unemployed and those who might have been more difficult to place. The barriers that such individuals can face include lack of skills such as reading and writing (Van den Berg & Van der Veer, 1992). A majority of the intervention group were female, but this was not so with the comparison group. A random assignment of individuals to the intervention and comparison groups would have been preferable, but was not acceptable to the participating agencies in the

context of the current study. Second, there is the possibility that other variable(s) were responsible for the outcomes discussed, such as regression to the mean (Bowling, 2002).

In recent research, significant differences have been found between the short-term and long-term unemployed in terms of obstacles to employment, particularly care obligations for children or older people (Thomsen, 2009). This study did not examine any such obstacles to employment. Significant differences in the health and working ability of the short-term and long-term unemployed have also been found (Thomsen, 2009). This programme was delivered on a full-time basis, and was not available on a more flexible, part-time basis. Finally, it has been suggested that programmes should be offered with the goal of improving the physical and/or mental health of the unemployed (Thomsen, 2009). While the WNJ programme aimed to improve psychological health, it did not address physical well-being.

Future evaluation studies and interventions

Future evaluation studies may be needed to look at a broader range of obstacles that the unemployed, particularly the long-term unemployed, face and how they can be overcome (Thomsen, 2009). Revising the goal and purpose of job search assistance programmes (and other active labour market programmes) in line with these findings could be expected to reduce the number of long-term unemployed (Thomsen, 2009).

Given the heterogeneity of individuals' responses to unemployment and training, more attention is needed to the study of individual differences, yet the research field is dominated by quantitative methods, which mainly report summary estimates of programme effectiveness (as in this study). It has been suggested that to maximise training outcomes, interventions should be designed specifically to cater for individual differences (Thomsen, 2009), particularly 'difficult to place' groups (Fletcher, 1998).

With regard to the evaluation of the WNJ programme, additional research is required to examine the causal relationships between the various mediators and to link them more accurately to specific outcomes. We also need to develop reliable measures of the active learning process used in the programme and to investigate the proposed causal effects on various outcomes. Examining the impact of the intervention on outcomes apart from unemployment (for example re-training, education, finding other life opportunities, and benefits for positive mental health) could also usefully be addressed. Finally, while previous international research indicates that the JOBS programme can be implemented cost-effectively (Vinokur *et al.*, 1991),

this point has not been investigated in Ireland. Further research may look at an economic evaluation of the programme in the current climate.

To conclude, this project involved evaluating the adoption of an evidence-based programme involving the partnership of multiple agencies across two jurisdictions. This study has shown that the WNJ programme is a successful job search assistance programme for a mixed profile of the unemployed, particularly the long-term unemployed. This aspect of the study is unique, in that the programme was applied with a group of people who had been unemployed for longer than in previous studies internationally. Long-term beneficial results have been documented which demonstrate that the programme can be implemented as a beneficial community-based intervention, and the introduction of the WNJ programme to Ireland has created an opportunity for the programme to reach a wide range of unemployed people, including the long-term unemployed. The positive findings support the case for scaling up the intervention at national level, and roll-out of the programme in other regional areas in the country is currently under way. The findings also support wider dissemination of this effective 20-hour intervention in other countries experiencing increasing unemployment and the need to support the mental health and well-being of unemployed people and their re-integration into the labour force.

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