

The Effect of Verbal Self-Guidance Training for Overcoming Employment Barriers: A Study of Turkish Women

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Women over the age of 40 were trained in verbal self guidance, a methodology for training people to identify dysfunctional self-statements and translate them into positive self-talk. Subsequently, they ($n=27$) had significantly higher self-efficacy with regard to re-employment than their counterparts who had been randomly assigned to a control group ($n=28$). In addition, they persisted in job search behavior significantly more so than those in the control group. Job search self-efficacy completely mediated the effect of the training program on job search behavior. Consequently, they were more likely to find a job in their area of interest within 6 months and 1 year of training than were those women in the control group.

Des femmes de plus de 40 ans d'une société musulmane, ont été formées à l'auto-régulation verbale, une méthode pour former les personnes à identifier les auto-évaluations dysfonctionnelles et à les traduire en un dialogue intérieur positif. En conséquence, elles ($n = 27$) ont une auto-efficacité significativement plus élevée en ce qui concerne le retour à l'emploi que leurs homologues du groupe contrôle ($n = 28$). De plus, elles persistent significativement plus dans le comportement de recherche d'emploi que celles du groupe contrôle. L'auto-efficacité dans la recherche d'emploi influence complètement l'effet du programme de formation sur le comportement de recherche d'emploi. En conséquence, elles étaient plus susceptibles de trouver un emploi en accord avec leur centre d'intérêts en moins de 6 mois et 1 an de formation que les femmes du groupe contrôle.

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INTRODUCTION

Turkey, a country where about 98 per cent of the population is Muslim, has been a secular state since the early 1920s with the adoption of a Parliamentary Democratic Government system. Turkey has laws that prohibit sex and age discrimination in the workplace. In addition, institutional structures (e.g. the Constitutional Court, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) have been put into place to ensure equal treatment for women and men. However, “the formal structures provide grounds for changes in lifestyle, but they do not necessitate or even produce these changes in lifestyles” (Kagıtcıbası, 1986, p. 485).

In 2006, the labor force participation rate for women in Turkey was only 26.9 per cent compared to 73.1 per cent for men (State Institute of Statistics of Turkey, 2006). This is significantly less than the average employment rate, 60.4 per cent for females, in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations (OECD database, 2005). These nations embrace the principles of representative democracy and a free market economy. In short, there remain barriers in the environment that discourage participation of women in Turkey’s labor market.

Turkish women are generally confined to traditional gender roles such as housewife and mother (Erguder, Esmer, & Kalaycıođlu, 1991). The norms, roles, and values in a culture not only influence one’s self-definition but also affect one’s behavior through prescribing the appropriate behaviors for the individual (Triandis, Malpas, & Davidson, 1973). Turkish culture is characterised by low gender egalitarianism and patriarchy (Kagıtcıbası, 1986; Fikret-Pasa, Kabasakal, & Bodur, 2001). Those women who are actively involved in the labor force typically drop out when they have children (Tascı & Tansel, 2005). This makes it difficult for them to re-enter the workforce at a later date because a continuous work history is a critical determinant of employability (Flanders & Anderson, 1973; Smith, Tabak, Showail, McLean Parks, & Kleist, 2005).

In a study of gender-role stereotypes and attitudes toward women’s career advancement in Turkey, Aycań (2004) found that lack of support for working women influences their self-perception and ideals. In a second study, she conducted in-depth interviews that revealed that many female managers reported that their family duties did not interfere with their work. They identified self-confidence as a key factor in overcoming situational barriers: “The greatest of all barriers against women is their low self-confidence. At the sight of the first disappointment or a problem, the ones with low self-confidence are the ones who give up and use children and husband as an excuse” (Aycań, 2004, p. 465). Thus it would appear that individual as well as environmental factors limit the employment of women in Turkey.

Aycan argued that a person's determination is among the most important factors affecting success in overcoming situational barriers.

In addition to employment discrimination based on sex, women who are over the age of 40 in Turkey also face discrimination based on age. Two studies reported that 38 per cent of classified advertisements stated an age limit for job applicants (Sesen, 2006); 56.8 per cent of the postings limited applications to job seekers between 25 and 30 years of age, while 35.6 per cent expressed a desire for applicants between 30 and 35 years of age (*Hurriyet Insan Kaynaklari* [Human Resources Newspaper], 2006). There is also evidence of age discrimination in the training and promotion policies of Turkish organisations that appear to disadvantage females relative to males (Özbilgin, 1998). In short, females in Turkey are susceptible to double jeopardy. They are likely to experience the joint effects of being a woman, and subsequently being over the age of 40. These environmental barriers pose a significant obstacle for women over the age of 40 as they attempt to enter or re-enter the workforce.

Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory posits reciprocal determinism among the person, environment, and behavior. It is an agentic theory in that it states that people are active agents in operating generatively and proactively, not just reactively, to shape the character of their social systems (Bandura, 2001). Among the mechanisms of personal agency, none, Bandura (2001) has argued, is more central or persuasive than self-efficacy, namely people's beliefs in their capability to not only exercise control over their own functioning, but in addition, environmental events. Thus the theory posits that efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency. The theory further states that unless people believe they can bring about a desired result and overcome a detrimental one through their own actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere when confronted by difficulties. Hence, a person's self-efficacy influences the extent to which a person's thoughts are optimistic versus pessimistic. The theory further states that it is on the basis of their efficacy beliefs that people choose what challenges to undertake.

This theory was chosen as a framework for developing a training intervention for this study because self-efficacy does quite well in predicting, explaining, and influencing human behavior (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2001). This is because to perform successfully in their environment, people must make relatively accurate judgments about their capabilities to perform given tasks, anticipate the possible effects of taking a specific course of action, size up situational opportunities and constraints, and regulate their behavior accordingly.

People with high self-efficacy see difficulties as surmountable challenges; they redouble their effort in the face of these challenges (Bandura, 1997). In contrast, people with low self-efficacy see obstacles as indicators of their

own of personal deficiencies. Social cognitive theory states that when people face challenges in the way of attaining their goal, they engage in either self-enabling or self-debilitating self-talk depending on their perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

Among the methods available to increase self-efficacy is persuasion from a significant other (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Both social cognitive theory and Aronson's (1999) self-persuasion theory state that the most powerful source of persuasion is one's self. Self-persuasion theory argues that changes in beliefs and attitudes induced by direct persuasion from others are often small and short-lived relative to those that stem from oneself. Self-persuasion is highly effective because it comes from a source that most people believe to be credible and trustworthy, namely themselves. Social cognitive theory states that what one says to or about one's self influences cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to events (Bandura, 2001). Self-enabling versus disabling talk determines which environmental cues an individual attends to, and how they are appraised. In short, there is convergent validity from both social cognitive theory and self-persuasion theory that one's self-talk is a primary determinant of self-regulation.

Meichenbaum (1977) developed a methodology for training people to change their negative to positive talk. This training in verbal self-guidance (VSG) involves teaching people to identify dysfunctional self-statements and translate them into positive ones. This is accomplished through three primary steps: (1) observing a trainer model the task, (2) performing the task while verbally instructing oneself overtly, and (3) performing the task while verbally instructing oneself covertly. Efficacy beliefs were not assessed in those studies.

The effectiveness of VSG training interventions has been limited primarily to clinical populations (Meichenbaum & Goodman, 1971) and young children (Schunk & Rice, 1984, 1985). Recently, however, VSG has been used effectively in organisational settings. Brown (2003) found that VSG increased the collective efficacy and teamplaying skills of college students who were working in groups on a simulated survival task. In a subsequent field experiment, Brown and Latham (2006) found that training in VSG increased the teamplaying skills of MBA students in their study groups. Of particular relevance to the present study, Millman and Latham (2001) found that seven 2-hour VSG training sessions, conducted over a 2-week period, resulted in significantly higher self-efficacy regarding re-employment, and a significantly greater number of displaced managers finding jobs within 9 months of training relative to the displaced managers in the control group. Latham and Budworth (2006) found that five 90-minute VSG training sessions with Native North Americans conducted over 5 days resulted in higher self-efficacy, as well as higher performance in a selection interview as rated by Caucasian managers. Following training, a significantly greater

number of Native North Americans obtained employment relative to their counterparts in the control group. With the exception of Brown's simulation, these three organisational studies employed quasi-experimental designs. Nevertheless, these findings suggest the benefit of assessing this intervention in another culture.

The purpose of the present field experiment was to assess the effectiveness of training unemployed females over the age of 40 in VSG so as to increase their self-efficacy in securing employment in Turkey. This study extends previous research by addressing the needs of a group who face significant environmental barriers to re-employment in their social cultural environment. This environmental context allows for the assessment of whether VSG is sufficiently strong to increase the self-efficacy and subsequent employment of women over the age of 40 who face historically entrenched employment discrimination.

Four hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: Training in VSG leads to significantly higher self-efficacy for the re-employment of women over the age of 40 in Turkey relative to their counterparts in the control group.

This hypothesis is consistent with Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory which states that self-enabling talk is concomitant with increases in self-efficacy, and Aronson's (1999) self-persuasion theory which states that the self is the most powerful source of persuasion.

Hypothesis 2: Women trained in VSG demonstrate a significantly greater amount of job search behavior relative to those in the control group.

This hypothesis is based on the fact that VSG for obtaining a job requires job seeking behavior, and that high self-efficacy enables people to take personal responsibility/initiative to change their environment. Social cognitive theory states that efficacy beliefs influence the challenges people choose to undertake (Bandura, 2001), in this instance, obtaining a job in an environment unfavorable to the employment of women.

Hypothesis 3: Job search self-efficacy mediates the effect of training on job search behavior.

This is because, as noted earlier, social cognitive theory states that self-efficacy has agentic properties with regard to taking action in the belief that difficult obstacles can be overcome. Agency involves not only deliberation over choices, it involves giving shape to the execution of appropriate courses of action (Bandura, 2001).

Hypothesis 4: Women trained in VSG are significantly more likely to find employment within 12 months of training as compared to their counterparts in the control group.

As noted earlier, social cognitive theory states that people with high self-efficacy persist by redoubling their efforts in the face of obstacles and set-backs (Bandura, 1986). This is because positive beliefs about one's abilities function as effective buffers against an adverse environment (Bandura, 2001). This hypothesis follows logically from the three that precede it.

METHOD

Participants

The women ($n = 55$) were recruited through employment agencies, advertisements in a local newspaper, job search websites, as well as postings in community centers in an urban city in Turkey. They were randomly assigned to a training, a placebo, or a control group. The women in the VSG training group ($n = 27$) were told that they would be involved in a 4-day re-employment workshop at a local university on improving job search skills. Trainees in the placebo group ($n = 15$) were told that they would be involved in a 1-day workshop to improve their job search skills. Trainees in the control group ($n = 13$) did not attend a workshop. All of the participants completed the questionnaires on self-efficacy.

The mean age of the trainees was 48 years ($SD = 5.68$ years). Fifty-six per cent of the trainees were high school graduates, 42 per cent were university graduates, and 2 per cent had a post-graduate degree. Almost half of the trainees (42.9%) had been unemployed for more than 3 years, 21.4 per cent were unemployed for 6 months, and 16.7 per cent were unemployed for more than 1.5 years. More than half of the trainees (61.9%) had previously worked in managerial positions. The women in the three groups did not differ significantly in terms of age, education, or years of unemployment.

Procedure

VSG Training. The trainees received VSG training in four 90-minute sessions over four consecutive days. Participants in the training and the placebo conditions were trained by the first author, a Turkish female. They were told that the purpose of the training program was to improve their confidence in securing a job.

On the first day, the training session started with a discussion of the trainees' beliefs about their unemployed status (i.e. why can't I find a job?)

and the possible environmental barriers (e.g. high unemployment rate, societal attitudes towards women's career opportunities, and attitudes of the potential employer towards older applicants) to their success in finding a job. After the group discussion, the trainer recorded the negative self-statements of the trainees (e.g. "There are many unemployed people who are young and educated. Why would they hire me instead of them?", "After spending a long time at home, I am not confident that I will perform well if I do get a job", "They are looking for someone who is active, ambitious, and flexible; I am too old for the jobs I want"). The trainees were asked to discuss how those negative self-statements affected their job search activities. Then they were introduced to VSG.

Consistent with Meichenbaum's (1975, 1977) procedure, the trainees were taught how to transform their negative self-statements into positive ones. First, they were trained to become aware of their negative self-statements (e.g. "I can't find a job no matter how hard I try; all the job postings I applied for did not work for me"). They were then asked to develop positive statements to guide their job search behavior (e.g. "Because of my past experiences, I know what I am capable of doing and I am very determined to get what I want", "My age means that I have a lot of experience in social relations which helps me to solve problems in the workplace effectively"). Consistent with Meichenbaum and Goodman (1971), the trainer modeled each statement and then asked the trainees to repeat the statements, first overtly, and then covertly.

On the second day, the focus of the training session was on job search channels. The trainees were given job advertisements found in a local recruitment paper. They were asked to talk about why they would or would not consider applying for the jobs advertised. The trainees were then instructed to apply the VSG technique to their self-statements about the job postings. First, they were asked to verbalise their negative self-statements (e.g. "They already indicated that they are looking for someone who is much younger than I am. How can I send my CV to them?"). Second, the trainees observed the trainer engage in VSG. Third, they were then asked to engage in VSG overtly and to do so again covertly changing their negative to positive self-talk. In order to eliminate negative self-talk about their job application, they were asked to verbalise positive statements that can be made about a particular job posting (e.g. "Look, they are looking for someone who has experience in sales. I do have sales experience from different companies. My age means that I have a lot of experience in social relations too. I can add a cover letter to my CV and tell them that they should consider my experience").

On the third day, the focus of the training was on the interview and the overall selection process. In dyads, the trainees applied VSG techniques to "mock" interviews. Practice interview questions were taken from a reputable

Turkish human resources website. While answering interview questions (e.g. “Why do you think you are suitable for this job?”), they used VSG to increase their self-efficacy with respect to giving appropriate answers (e.g. “I can answer this question in a confident manner; I will talk about my competencies suitable for this job. I will not let myself focus on my age or my responsibilities at home”).

On the fourth and final day of the training program, the trainees rehearsed VSG relative to all of the job search activities they had been exposed to in class. The women were also encouraged to continue using VSG at home before applying for the jobs, and again while preparing for an employment interview.

Placebo and Control Groups. The trainees in the “placebo” group received training in job search behavior (e.g. résumé writing, using different job search channels, and improving interview skills). They were not trained in VSG. The people in the VSG condition were not exposed to the material in this condition. The control group did not receive training of any kind.

Measures

The subsequent measures were translated into Turkish by the first author. Two bilingual academics in Turkey back-translated the instruments to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Job Search Self-Efficacy. Consistent with Bandura’s (2005) recommendation, a job search self-efficacy scale was developed specifically for this study. This is because a domain-specific scale has a greater likelihood of explaining variance in an investigation of domain-specific behaviors than an omnibus scale. The scale consisted of six items that used a 5-point Likert-type format. For example, all trainees were asked to indicate whether they were “1” (not at all confident) to “5” (very confident) in their ability to “Impress interviewers during an employment interview”, “Convince the employer to make a job offer”, and “Overcome any obstacle standing in your way of finding a job”. Self-efficacy measures were collected at the beginning and immediately following the end of the training program from the trainees. Cronbach’s α s for this measure before and after the training were .70 and .84, respectively.

Active Job Search Behavior. Six months subsequent to the training program, job search behavior was assessed using a six-item measure developed by Blau (1993). Trainees in the three conditions were asked to indicate the extent to which they had exhibited active job search behavior “1” (never) to “5” (very often—at least ten times) over the last 6 months. Sample items

TABLE 1
Means and Correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Post-training self-efficacy	19.83	2.90	—			
2. Job search behavior	14.67	2.49	.59**	—		
3. Employment	.40	.494	.37*	.45**	—	
4. Job satisfaction	4.14	.65	.21	.23	—	—

Note: Correlation between job satisfaction and employment cannot be measured as satisfaction was evaluated only for those who had employment.

** correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

* correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed).

include: “Sent out résumés to potential employers”, “Contacted an employment agency, executive search firm or state employment service”. Cronbach’s α was .89 for this measure.

Employment Status. Employment status of the trainees was also assessed 6 months as well as 1 year after the training program. In addition, satisfaction was assessed because it reflects the fact that the quality of re-employment is an important criterion of the success of job search facilitation programs (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999). Consistent with Wanberg et al., we used their one item to ask the trainees to indicate their satisfaction with their new job on a scale ranging from “1” (not at all satisfied) to “5” (satisfied to a large extent). A meta-analysis of single-item measures of overall job satisfaction found an average uncorrected correlation of .63 with scale measures of overall job satisfaction (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997).

In summary, self-efficacy was measured prior to and immediately after training. Job search behavior was measured 6 months after training. Re-employment was measured 6 months and 12 months after the training intervention.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all relevant variables.

An ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the two control groups for self-efficacy or job search behavior. Because of the relatively small sample size ($n = 15, 13$) in these two conditions, the data were reanalysed using a non-parametric statistic. Again, Mann-Whitney U tests revealed no significant differences. Similarly a chi-square test revealed no significant differences regarding employment status. Consequently, the two control groups were collapsed into one.

Test of Hypotheses

Self-Efficacy. Although the *t*- and *F*-tests are robust regarding violations of the assumptions underlying them (Boneau, 1960), we examined the data on self-efficacy and found that there was not only homogeneity of variance, but in addition, the data were normally distributed. A repeated measures ANOVA indicated a significant difference between the pre-measure ($M = 20.70$, $SD = 2.60$) and post-measure of self-efficacy ($M = 29.63$, $SD = 2.56$) for women in the VSG group ($F(1, 41) = 196.70$, $p < .001$, $d = .91$). Planned *t*-tests revealed a significant difference between the training ($M = 29.63$, $SD = 2.56$) and control group ($M = 23.93$, $SD = 2.12$) on the measure of self-efficacy at the end of the training program ($t = 42.20$, $df = 41$, $p < .001$, $d = .97$). Hence, the first hypothesis was supported. Additionally, self-efficacy at the end of the training program correlated significantly with active job search behavior ($r = .56$, $p < .001$) assessed 6 months later.

Because approximately two-thirds of the trainees were former managers, their self-efficacy for becoming re-employed may have been different from those women who had held lower status jobs. To examine this possibility, the self-efficacy of former managers ($n = 36$, $M = 21.72$, $SD = 2.75$) was compared with those who had held non-managerial jobs ($n = 15$, $M = 20.73$, $SD = 1.71$). Data from four people were not analysed because they did not report their previous job status. A two-tailed *t*-test revealed no significant difference ($t = 1.28$, $df = 49$, $p = .20$).

Job Search Behavior. ANOVA revealed a significant difference between the VSG ($M = 16.07$, $SD = 2.39$) and the control group ($M = 13.32$, $SD = 1.74$) on actively searching for a job ($F(1, 41) = 24.00$, $p < .001$, $d = .31$) during the 6-month period following the training program. The correlation between job search behavior and obtaining a job was significant ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). Thus Hypothesis 2 was also supported.

To test whether self-efficacy at the end of the training program mediated the effect of the training on subsequent job search behavior, a series of regression equations, as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), were conducted. The training had a significant positive effect on self-efficacy ($\beta = .76$, $t(41) = 7.33$, $p < .01$) and active job search behavior ($\beta = .53$, $t(41) = 4.0$, $p < .01$). When active job search behavior was regressed onto both self-efficacy and training, self-efficacy remained significant ($\beta = .39$, $t(41) = 1.97$, $p = .05$). However, the training program was no longer a significant predictor of job search behavior ($\beta = .24$, $t(41) = 1.20$, $p = .23$). Thus, self-efficacy fully mediated the relationship between training in VSG and active job search behavior. Hence, Hypothesis 3 was supported. The regression analysis is outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Self-efficacy as a Mediator of Training Program on Job Search Behavior

Step and variable	B	β	R ²	ΔR^2
Step 1: Training condition VSG vs. control	0.46	.53**	.31**	
Step 2: Mediator Self-efficacy	0.04	.39*	.28**	.28**
Step 3: Training condition VSG vs. control	0.21	.24	.35	.06

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Securing Employment. Of those in the VSG training group, 52 per cent had secured employment within 6 months of training. Only 29 per cent had secured employment in the other two combined control groups. One year following the training program 59 per cent of the training group had secured employment, while the control group remained at 29 per cent.

Logistic regression was used to assess the fourth hypothesis with the dependent variable, namely employment status: employed versus unemployed. After 6 months, difference in employment status was marginally significant ($\chi^2 = 3.13$, $p = .08$). At the 1-year follow-up, the difference in employment status was significant ($\chi^2 = 5.35$, $p < .05$). The odds ratio for being in the control group was less than one (.27). Therefore, trainees in the control group were significantly less likely to secure employment. In addition, in support of this fourth hypothesis, ANOVA indicated that women who had been trained in VSG were more satisfied ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .65$) with their subsequent employment than the individuals in the control group ($M = 3.75$, $SD = .46$), ($F(1, 20) = 5.76$; $p < .05$, $d = .23$) who obtained a job. Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

DISCUSSION

Training in VSG increased self-efficacy for people in Turkey who typically encounter employment discrimination in terms of two variables, namely both their sex and their age. Women over the age of 40 who were trained in VSG subsequently had higher self-efficacy and were more likely to engage in job search behavior as compared to their untrained peers. One year post-training, VSG trainees were more likely to have secured employment in Turkey than were their counterparts in the control group.

The theoretical and practical significance of this study is at least fourfold. First, Bandura's (1986, 2001, 2006) social cognitive theory provides a useful framework for designing training programs for giving people confidence

and determination to overcome obstacles in the environment preventing them from attaining their goals. Specifically, increasing self-efficacy enabled women to overcome discriminatory barriers against age and gender that appear to be entrenched in Turkish employment practices. Despite a political and legal environment that prohibits employment discrimination against women, it nevertheless continues. Despite the fact that VSG is solely a person-level intervention, it has a significant positive effect on an individual's experience in the job market with displaced managers in North America (Millman & Latham, 2001), Native North Americans (Latham & Budworth, 2006), and as shown in this study, women over 40 in Turkey. It would appear that increasing a person's self-efficacy, as Bandura (1997, 2001) has argued, is indeed a powerful way to assist individuals in overcoming significant environmental barriers, and it is a necessary one. The placebo condition, consisting of résumé writing and interviewing skills, was no more effective than the control condition in enabling women over the age of 40 to find employment. This finding lends support to the contention that increasing self-efficacy is critical to the effectiveness of training programs (Haccoun & Saks, 1998; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). This finding also supports previous studies showing the beneficial effect of high self-efficacy on job search and subsequent employment (e.g. Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Crossley & Stanton, 2005; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005). As Frese, Garst, and Fay (2007) found, the environment itself does not directly influence behavior; rather the environment is mediated by a critical psychological state, self-efficacy.

Second, and arguably the most important contribution of this study to the literature, is the finding that VSG represents a straightforward and useful adaptation of a procedure, originally developed in clinical psychology, for impacting organisational behavior. This was the first field experiment, as opposed to quasi experiment, to show the effectiveness of this training procedure. Latham and Heslin (2003) have argued the benefits of adapting clinical psychology interventions to the workplace.

Third, this study is a step toward countering the bias in the organisational psychology literature toward studying only those populations that embrace Euro-American, Judeo-Christian values (Dreher, 2000). As globalisation becomes increasingly a reality, the ability to find training methods that are relevant to myriad populations grows in importance. Triandis and Suh (2002, p. 135) stated that there is a need for "universal generalizations; while at the same time admitting culture-specific information". The results of this study and those that preceded it (e.g. Latham & Budworth, 2006; Millman & Latham, 2001) show that the agentic properties of self-efficacy operate in the workplace regardless of whether an employee is seeking employment in the Middle East or the West, regardless of sex, age, or ethnicity. Furthermore, training in VSG did not need to be adapted to the culture

in which it took place. The methodology used was essentially the same as that used by Millman and Latham (2001) and Latham and Budworth (2006) in North America. VSG training appears to be an effective way of increasing self-efficacy regardless of these demographic variables and regardless of whether the training is conducted in a Western or a Middle Eastern society.

Fourth, in their *Annual Review of Psychology* chapter on training, Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) concluded that it “might be useful to consider the use of self-efficacy as a deliberate training intervention (i.e. developing training targeted at raising self-efficacy) as well as a desirable outcome of training (i.e. as an indicator of training success)” (p. 479). This is because among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy (Bandura, in press). This study is an answer to their call. VSG, developed by Meichenbaum, is a practical and straightforward way for increasing a trainee’s self-efficacy in Eastern as well as Western societies.

The practical importance of this study includes the fact that VSG is a simple and inexpensive training technique. It requires relatively few training sessions, four 90-minute sessions in the present study, to bring about a significant desirable practical effect such as re-entry into the workforce. Of practical as well as theoretical importance is the finding that VSG is effective in increasing self-efficacy which in turn gives people the confidence to change their environment so that it is receptive to them. The present findings support those of Frese et al. (2007) which showed that people who take personal initiative are often able to overcome environmental barriers to their goal.

A limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size which arguably limits generalisability of the findings. Further, the people who volunteered to participate in this field experiment may be different in unknown ways from women who did not volunteer. This issue is problematic in most studies of training interventions. Finally, this field experiment involved women from an urban center rather than a rural setting. Finding a job in a rural setting where there are relatively few jobs may require more than high self-efficacy.

From a social cognitive point of view, a limitation of this study is that it did not take into account additional ways of changing the environment so that it is responsive to the goal of women over 40 to obtain re-employment. Consideration should be given to integrating training in VSG with macro-organisational-level interventions designed to overcome discriminatory employment practices. Many organisations (e.g. AT&T in North America) have taken it upon themselves to increase the presence of women in the workforce through diversity management programs that include mentoring/coaching women. There is a paucity of studies on their effectiveness in bringing about a relatively enduring change in behavior.

In the present study, the focus on a person variable, self-efficacy, led to changes in the trainees' subsequent environment, the admission of women into employment settings. As Bandura (in press) has noted, to be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and the course of environmental events. As social cognitive theory states, people are contributors to their life circumstances not just products of them. This does not suggest that sex and age discrimination can be "fixed" solely by "fixing" women over the age of 40 any more than the passage of laws alone can be expected to change the environment. Nevertheless, these are desirable starting points.

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