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Using Psychological Skills Training from Sport Psychology to Enhance the Life Satisfaction of Adolescent Mexican Orphans

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if a psychological skills training program based on sport psychology could enhance the global self-worth and perceived life satisfaction of adolescent Mexican orphans. Adolescents (N = 34) completed the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents and the Satisfaction With Life Scale and were invited to take part in 15 sessions involving discussions and activities related to optimal activation, concentration and attention, imagery, self-talk, time-management, and self-confidence. Each session also contained active games, the majority of which were designed to develop teamwork, communication, and trust. Thirty participants attended between 5 and 13 sessions each, and 26 of those completed the questionnaires a second time at the end of the program. There was a significant increase in both global self-worth and perceived life satisfaction. Possible cultural issues relevant to the participants are discussed.

Introduction

Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH) cares for orphaned and abandoned children in Latin America (see www.nphamigos.org for complete information). NPH was founded in 1954 in Mexico and currently has homes in nine Latin American countries. The main facility in Miacatlán, Mexico is home for almost 1000 children (referred to as pequeños rather than orphans) with approximately 200 additional older children attending the NPH vocational school in nearby Cuernavaca. It was with these older children that I spent the month of January, 2005.

A number of years ago my mother visited the home in Miacatlán and she mailed me a photograph of the children playing volleyball using a piece of string with plastic bags pinned to it

as the net. Having spent 18 years of my life playing volleyball at an elite level, I felt compelled to improve their sporting equipment. Donations from friends and colleagues in Brisbane, Australia were collected and sent. A year or two later I was wondering if helping a team win a few extra games each season was really making a significant difference in the grand scheme of things. As a sport psychologist I have spent years teaching psychological skills to athletes, exercisers, and performing artists. In my undergraduate classes I often mention how psychological skills were not only beneficial for enhancing performance and enjoyment of participation, but also for learning skills useful in areas of life outside of sport. The arrival of an NPH newsletter in the mail one day caused a synergy of these different cognitions and spawned the idea of teaching psychological skills to the pequeños.

I was not interested in measuring specific psychological skills because it was not clear to me how meaningful it would be to know that these individuals had improved their ability to set goals or to concentrate. I also was not interested in measuring sporting performance as not all of the participants competed in sport. I decided that even though there was probably a greater chance of obtaining statistically significant improvement in the knowledge or use of targeted psychological skills, it would be more meaningful to know if psychological skills training could influence self-concept or perceived life satisfaction. Self-concept has been considered to be one of the most important indicators of psychological adjustment (Byrne, 1996). In addition, Petlichkoff (2004) has suggested that psychological skills influence psychological well-being, particularly for children and adolescents.

Method

Participants

Thirty four of the adolescents (14 girls and 20 boys) at NPH in Cuernavaca volunteered to participate in a three week daily program advertised to teach skills that would help them with sport, work, music, or any other area of achievement. Ages ranged from 15 to 20 with a mean of 17.09 years. They had been at NPH for an average of 6.97 years (range 1.16 to 16 years). Participants were studying tourism ($n = 10$), computers ($n = 10$), childcare ($n = 6$), electronics ($n = 5$), or accounting ($n = 3$)

Instruments

Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents. Harter's (1988) Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA) is an instrument designed to measure multiple dimensions of self-concept in the adolescent stage of development. Based on Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children, the SPPA measures a variety of self-concept dimensions (e.g., physical appearance, social acceptance) as well as global self-worth. Numerous researchers (e.g., Eiser, Eiser, & Harvermans, 1995; Trent, Rusell, & Cooney, 1994; Worrell, 1997) have tested the psychometrics of the English version of the SPPA, resulting in support of slightly different subscales. Of most relevance to the present study, Pastor, Balaguer, Atienza and García-Merita (2001) tested a Spanish version of the SPPA with students aged 15 to 18 years and found support for six clearly differentiated self-concept dimensions (i.e., Scholastic Competence, Physical Appearance, Athletic Competence, Behavioral Conduct, Close Friendship, and Social Acceptance) as well as a

unidimensional subscale of Global Self-Worth. Cronbach Alphas ranged from .62 to .90. The items pertaining to Job Competence from the original SPPA were omitted as they were believed to be irrelevant to the majority of the participants. As job competence was also irrelevant to the sample in this study, the Spanish translation from the Pastor et al. study was used. Items were scored on the subscales obtained in the previous Spanish study, thus ignoring the items designed to measure Romantic Attraction.

Satisfaction With Life Scale. The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) is a multi-item scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) to measure life satisfaction without the possibly confounding factors of enthusiasm or apathy. The original English version has been found to have good internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Atienza, Pons, Balaguer, and García-Merita (2000) had the SWLS translated into Spanish, the only change being the use of a 5-point rather than the original 7-point Likert scale. A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model fit was acceptable. The Spanish version of the SWLS was also found to have good internal consistency and construct validity (Atienza et al.). Relevant to the present study, the Atienza et al. study tested the instrument on adolescents.

Procedure

The program contained 15 sessions of approximately 90 minutes each, with separate sessions for girls and boys. Sessions were held on weekdays for three weeks. The first session began, and the final session ended, with the completion of the SPPA and the SWLS, using codes instead of names to ensure anonymity. The overarching theme for the program was “Control the Controllable”. Individual sessions contained discussions and activities related to optimal activation, concentration and attention, imagery, self-talk, time-management, and self-confidence. Each participant was given a folder in which to keep handouts and written exercises. Australian stickers were used as rewards for punctual attendance. Each session also contained active games, the majority of which were designed to develop teamwork, communication, and trust (see Hanrahan & Carlson, 2000). Many of the participants played soccer and/or basketball, so examples from these sports were used within the sessions. However, as not all of the participants were athletes, examples were also taken from the achievement domains of studying, music, dancing, and writing.

Results

Attendance

School examinations, dentist appointments, illness, soccer games, dance rehearsals, and apathy all contributed to absences. Participants attended an average of 8.82 of the 15 sessions (range 1 to 13). The four participants who attended fewer than 5 sessions were omitted from analyses. An additional four participants were also omitted as they failed to complete the post-test. Missing data meant that between 24 and 26 pequeños who attended at least five sessions had complete pre-test and post-test data for the various scales.

Paired Sample Statistics

The program resulted in significant increases in life satisfaction ($t(24) = -2.92, p = .008$), global self-worth ($t(25) = -2.37, p = .026$), and physical appearance self-concept ($t(24) = -2.29, p = .031$). See Table 1 for means and standard deviations. The mean increase in life satisfaction was .33 on a 5 point scale. For the four *pequeños* who only attended one or two sessions the mean increase was only .05 between pre-test and post-test. Global self-worth increased an average of .30 on a 4-point scale for those who attended five or more sessions, but decreased .33 for those who only attended one or two sessions.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-test Means and Standard Deviations

Scale	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)
Life Satisfaction	3.59 (.85)	3.92 (.62)
Global Self-Worth	2.90 (.60)	3.20 (.63)
Physical Appearance	2.84 (.86)	3.22 (.88)
Social Acceptance	2.50 (.88)	2.68 (.84)
Behavioral Conduct	2.68 (.75)	2.81 (.81)
Athletic Competence	2.78 (.81)	2.66 (.87)
Close Friendship	2.72 (1.06)	2.89 (.90)
Scholastic Competence	2.11 (.44)	2.26 (.72)

Discussion

Although the program never specifically focused on life satisfaction, global self-worth, or physical appearance self-concept, it appears as though the acquisition of psychological skills commonly included in sport psychology programs effectively increased scores in these variables. The study is limited by the absence of a control group, although the minimal change or decrease in means of the four participants who did not attend at least five sessions suggest that participation in the program rather than some confounding variable was responsible for the observed results (although of course these individuals were not randomly assigned to a control group). These findings support the contention that psychological skills are beneficial for learning skills useful in areas of life outside of sport. As physical appearance was never addressed within the program, it is not clear why physical appearance self-concept improved after the program.

Possibly when people are happier with themselves and their lives, they may rate their appearances less harshly.

Although control was not specifically measured, I believe that participation in the program gave the *pequeños* a sense of control that may have been missing in their lives. In the second session of the program the participants were asked to list six things they could control and six things they could not control. The majority of the participants could list a number of things they could not control (which is not particularly surprising as they lived in an institutionalized environment), but few could think of anything they could control. During a session near the end of the program almost all the *pequeños* could list more than 20 things they could control. Petlichkoff (2004) suggested that acquiring psychological skills encourages adolescents to become self-regulated learners, and that self-regulated learners develop strategies to improve performance and interact more effectively with their environment.

Cultural Issues

“Culture” is a difficult concept to define. Culture has been defined simply by race, religious beliefs, communal rituals, and shared traditions. On a more complex level, culture refers to the manner in which behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge “are produced through systems of meaning, through structures of power, and through the institutions in which these are deployed” (Donald & Rattansi, 1992, p. 4). I am a white American Australian who was working with a group of Latino adolescents in a Catholic based organization (I am not Catholic), where all communication occurred in Spanish. Aside from the differences in race, religion, and first language, I had grown up in a family home with two parents and one sister. Although some of the participants had experienced a traditional home environment for the initial stages of their lives, others had lived on the street or in huge rubbish dumps outside of Mexico City before arriving at NPH, an institutionalized environment with little privacy. Although I had struggled financially when I was a university student, I did not have the experience of true poverty familiar to many of the *pequeños*. Therefore, to consider that the only cultural difference between myself and the participants was that I was Australian and they were Mexican is naïve and misleading. The fact that I stayed at the orphanage (rather than a nearby hotel), lined up with the *pequeños* with a bowl and spoon for lunches and dinners, and saw them outside of my sessions helped with the development of rapport and my understanding of some of the colloquialisms. My genuine interest in Latin dance also probably broke a few barriers. My temporary immersion into life at NPH allowed me to get at least a little insight into their current environment.

Punctuality was not an ingrained concept with the participants. I do not know whether this was a by-product of Mexican culture or NPH culture. When buses were organized to take all of the adolescents from Cuernavaca to Miacatlán for the day, I officially was told the buses would be leaving at 7:30. Many of the *pequeños* told me not to bother to show up until 7:45 or 8:00 as there was no way the buses would leave at 7:30. They were correct; we left shortly after 8:00. Similar leniency was noted for departures for soccer games, meeting times, and even dinner time. Although the director threatened to lock them out of the dining hall if they arrived more than 5 minutes late, the very next evening dinner was 45 minutes late in being ready so everyone was told to come late. Inconsistent reinforcement of punctuality by the sub-directors probably exacerbated the issue, as sometimes they lectured about the importance of being on time, and

other times they were late themselves. For my first few sessions it was typical to have more than half of each group arriving more than 30 minutes late. As the time for sessions was limited by access to the hall and other activities of the participants, I needed to shorten sessions, and therefore could not cover what I had planned. I initially tried to deal with the tardiness by having the fun games at the beginning of the session, but as many of the games required a minimum number of participants, this strategy was not successful. I then enlisted the help of a sub-director to remind people what time the sessions began, and rewarded prompt arrival with stickers of Australian animals (which had earlier proved to be popular). Although I do not know whether it was the result of sticker rewards, reminders by the sub-director, or the participants' desire to be involved in the program, punctuality dramatically improved. The "culture" of tardiness changed.

Future Directions

Results of this relatively small study indicate that psychological skills traditionally taught within sport psychology may enhance the global self-worth and perceived life-satisfaction of orphans in Mexico. NPH has homes in eight other Latin American countries, and I would enjoy the opportunity to extend the research to these locations. The research protocol could be improved through the involvement of control groups and preferably age-matched participants who are not orphans. Ideally local psychologists could be involved in the program in each country to make the program an on-going enterprise.

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