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The Career Beliefs of Homeless Veterans: Vocational Attitudes as Indicators of Employability

Hedva Porat, Gary Marshall, and William Howell
VA Palo Alto Health Care System
Menlo Park, California

This study analyzes homeless veterans' career beliefs and suggests how these beliefs may limit their employability. Using the Career Beliefs Inventory (CBI; Krumboltz, 1991), the vocational beliefs of 279 homeless veterans were compared to those of two control groups: one employed (N = 390), the other unemployed (N = 67). Even though the three groups had significant demographic, medical, and social differences, there were remarkable similarities in how they viewed employment. Further research on how homeless veterans' vocational attitudes manifest into tangible behavior is required to substantiate the importance of the CBI results.

The majority of research on homeless veterans has been devoted to issues of mental health, substance abuse, and crime. Little, if any, has analyzed the career values and goals that may affect homeless veterans. Yet the ways in which the homeless think and the attitudes, ethics, and perspectives they harbor have long been considered pivotal contributors to homeless people's alienation from mainstream society. In order to better serve homeless veterans, and perhaps the general homeless population, it is crucial that these assumptions be analyzed.

This study's data on homeless veterans' vocational attitudes were gathered at the Next Step Center, a vocational rehabilitation center based in Menlo Park, California. The center, which is affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Palo Alto Health Care System, offers comprehensive assessment, counseling, training, and placement services to veterans. In 1989, the center received a grant under the McKinney Homeless Assistance

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Hedva Porat, Next Step Center, MS 116B-6, 795 Willow Rd., Menlo Park, CA 94025.

Act (1987) to provide employment services to homeless veterans. The Next Step Center has since contacted over 3,000 homeless veterans and placed nearly 1,500 in competitive employment. The center offers community outreach, job training, referrals to drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, vocational counseling, job placement, transitional housing, and follow-up services.

A critical component of the center is vocational assessment. On being admitted to the program, each client is interviewed by a vocational rehabilitation counselor on issues relating to health, family structure, criminal background, and vocational factors such as education, military training, reasons for leaving previous jobs, and past job performance. In addition, clients go through a full day of psychometric assessment, which includes an aptitude test, the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB; U.S. Department of Labor, 1982); an interest inventory, the USES Interest Inventory (U.S. Department of Labor, 1981); a personality inventory, the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (Edwards, 1981); and, since 1991, the CBI. The demographic information on homeless veterans was collected from the veteran's registration form and the answer sheet of the CBI; information regarding career attitudes, however, was obtained solely from the CBI.

Test Instrument

The CBI, which was developed by Stanford University education and psychology professor John Krumboltz (1991), consists of 96 questions, the results of which are measured on 25 scales. This instrument can be administered to anyone with at least an eighth grade education, making the test appropriate for subjects with even a limited education. The purpose of the inventory is not to determine "right" or "wrong" perspectives, but to assess categories of beliefs that could identify assumptions that might be limiting or counter productive. Each item consists of a statement relating to career goals, beliefs, or attitudes; respondents are asked whether they strongly disagree, disagree, are uncertain, agree, or strongly agree with the given statement. Each item is thus scored 1 through 5, reflecting degree of agreement; some items are weighted negatively and scored in reverse. Items are then grouped into 25 scales covering issues relating to (a) a respondent's current career situation and satisfaction, (b) factors that affect happiness, (c) factors that influence his or her career decisions, (d) career changes he or she is willing to make, and (e) efforts he or she is willing to initiate. Each scale consists of two to seven questions whose scores are summed and the total then transformed into scale scores ranging from 10 to 50. Scores below 40 generally suggest the presence of beliefs that have caused career difficulties for others in the past. These lower scores require follow-up counseling in order to identify the belief's origin and influence on a given individual.

Take, for example, Statement 6 on the inventory: "If I spent a great deal of time and energy doing one kind of work, I would not change to another

later." Agreement or uncertainty with this claim suggests possible limitations in a job search—rigidity, lack of vision, or limited information about alternative careers that utilize transferable skills. General agreement yields a low CBI score and contributes to a cumulative low score on Scale 17, Job Experimentation. Statement 51, however, is weighted in reverse: "I don't mind telling people the real reasons for my career plans." General agreement here (suggesting a willingness to disclose reasons for one's career choices) yields a high individual score and contributes to a high score on Scale 4, Openness. A low score indicates a hesitancy to disclose one's thinking about career planning and should be confronted by a counselor.

The Samples

The career beliefs of 279 homeless veterans were compared to the career beliefs of two other groups, one employed (n = 390) and the other unemployed (n = 67). All homeless veterans (henceforth referred to as the VA sample) were tested at the Next Step Center between 1991 and 1993. At the time of testing all participants were free from drugs and had no severe mental disorders; information from the other two samples (hereafter referred to as the employed and unemployed norm groups) was collected under John Krumboltz's direction at universities and vocational counseling centers across the United States as part of establishing norms for the CBI. Only those participants who received a satisfactory consistency score were included in the present study. An unsatisfactory consistency score raises doubts as to the validity of a given individual's answers.

The samples were controlled for gender (only men were included because the VA population is over 95% male) and age (mean client age = 40.62 for the employed norm group, 38.90 for the unemployed norm group, and 39.94 for the VA sample).

The participants from all three groups were compared on three general variables, as described in the following sections.

Educational Level

The educational level of 71.3% of the employed norm group and 56.6% of the unemployed norm group was 4 or more years of college. Only 5.4% of the VA sample, however, had similar educational levels. A Pearson chi-square test showed that the three groups were unlikely to have been drawn from the same population, $p < .001$. A probability of less than .001 is considered a significant statistical difference.

Employment Level

Of the employed norm group, 80.8% worked in white collar jobs (a category designating professional, managerial, clerical, or sales positions). The percentage for the unemployed norm group was 73.2%. By contrast, 76.3%

of the VA sample were blue collar workers (i.e., skilled, semiskilled, or unskilled).

Career Satisfaction

Participants were asked to rate their occupational satisfaction in one of three categories: dissatisfied, satisfied, or very satisfied. As to be expected, the VA sample and unemployed norm group revealed a high similarity on this scale, with 77.3% and 88.7%, respectively, defining themselves as being dissatisfied with their occupations. Only 42.1% of the employed norm group expressed dissatisfaction with their careers.

Additional demographic information was collected only on the VA sample. All veterans at the time of testing were homeless, meaning they did not pay rent at any fixed location and typically lived in shelters, transitional housing, hospitals, or on the streets.[1] Vietnam era veterans made up 63.1% of the sample, higher than the national average of 50% (Rosenheck, 1991). Combat veterans made up 36.9% of the sample, and 28.3% had a disability that was determined by the VA to be service connected. Most (92.5%) of this homeless population lacked any stable family structure, being either single, divorced, separated, or widowed, a statistic that mirrors the national average of 85% among homeless individuals (Bean, 1987). Most of the sample (66.4%) reported being homeless from 1 to 12 months, and 24.5% stated they were homeless for over a year. Mounting research suggests a direct and negative correlation between length of homelessness and employability (Wenzel, 1992). The vast majority of the population reported having substance abuse problems (78.9%), and 18.8% of this population reported having psychiatric, medical, or PTSD problems (though at the time of testing they were generally clear of such health-related issues). National data on homeless individuals suggest similar trends. A large percentage (67.1%) of the overall homeless population suffer from substance abuse problems, and 31.2% suffer from psychiatric problems (Ropers & Boyer, 1982). These issues often are compounded by criminal histories. Of the VA sample, 58.3% had a prior criminal record, and 25.4% had charges pending, were on probation, or on parole at the time of their intake to the Next Step Center; these results are congruent with other studies on homeless veterans (Seidner, 1990).

These veterans did not manifest serious cognitive deficiencies. The average G score on the GATB (which is roughly equivalent to the I.Q. score

[1]Section 103 of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (1987) states that an individual is homeless if he or she lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence, and has a primary night-time residence that is (a) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations, (b) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or (c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

determined by the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale–Revised [WAIS-R; Wechsler, 1981]) was 98.6, which is in the normal adult range of 100 with a standard deviation of 20. The other demographic information, however, suggests serious, long-term problems related to unemployment, substance abuse, criminal behavior, and social alienation. These data generally correspond with the data collected on homeless veterans around the country (Rosenheck & Koegel, 1993; Wenzel, 1993).

Many of these results may also apply to homeless men in general, not only to veterans. Virtually all available research suggests that, although there are minor differences between homeless veterans and non-veterans in terms of race and education (Bean, 1987; Rosenheck, 1994), neither group differs significantly with regard to such issues as residential instability, current social functioning, physical health, mental illness, or substance abuse (Rosenheck, 1991; Rosenheck & Koegel, 1993).

Results

The means for each group on each of the CBI scales are presented in Table 1. A Kruskall-Wallis one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for differences among the VA sample, the employed norm group, and the unemployed norm group. The Kruskall-Wallis ANOVA measures the statistical probability that all the differences among the groups are due to chance; to adjust for the number of comparisons performed, a probability of less than .001 was considered as indicating a statistically significant difference. The Kruskall-Wallis ANOVA indicated no significant differences on 12 of the scales (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13, 17, 20, 21, 22, and 24; see Table 2 for item descriptions) and significant differences on 12 others (2, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 23, and 25). Where a significant difference was indicated, a Mann-Whitney U test was then used to determine which specific group comparisons were statistically significant (i.e., VA vs. Unemployed Norm, VA vs. Employed Norm, and Employed vs. Unemployed Norm). A probability of less than .05 was considered as indicating a statistically significant difference. Table 3 presents the probabilities associated with the Mann-Whitney tests. On 10 of the scales for which the Kruskall-Wallis ANOVA indicated a significant difference among the groups, the Mann-Whitney test showed that the VA group differed from both the Employed Norm and the Unemployed Norm (see Table 4 for list and description of scales). In the other two instances where the Kruskall-Wallis ANOVA indicated a significant difference among the groups, the Mann-Whitney test showed that the VA group differed from the Employed Norm group, but not from the Unemployed Norm group (see Table 5 for list and description of scales).

Discussion

There are some significant, and perhaps surprising, similarities among this study's three samples. For example, the results on Scale 5, Achievement (see Table 2), suggest that homeless veterans are as highly interested in

Table 1
Mean Career Beliefs Inventory (CBI) Scores for Each Scale

Scale	Samples			Probability associated with Kruskall-Wallis ANOVA[d]
	VA[a]	Employed norm[b]	Unemployed norm[c]	
2. Career Plans	29.14	26.99	32.91	.000
3. Acceptance of Uncertainty	28.96	28.01	31.49	.023
4. Openness	39.57	39.95	38.93	.436
5. Achievement	39.55	38.39	38.66	.141
6. College Education	34.03	32.23	33.28	.144
7. Intrinsic Satisfaction	36.65	38.37	38.24	.000
8. Peer Equality	21.15	21.47	19.58	.099
9. Structured Work Environment	34.93	32.46	31.64	.000
10. Control	32.51	32.78	31.87	.605
11. Responsibility	27.11	31.02	30.96	.000
12. Approval of Others	30.36	24.28	26.19	.000
13. Self-Other Comparisons	34.28	33.67	33.15	.278
14. Occupation/College Variation	39.27	41.96	40.99	.000
15. Career Path Flexibility	26.81	33.34	31.15	.000
16. Post-Training Transition	31.41	33.87	33.73	.000
17. Job Experimentation	34.38	33.91	34.16	.354
18. Relocation	33.82	27.79	27.73	.000
19. Improving Self	40.39	36.94	38.28	.000
20. Persisting While Uncertain	39.50	38.75	37.88	.201
21. Taking Risks	38.74	39.75	39.27	.063
22. Learning Job Skills	37.76	37.35	37.16	.412
23. Negotiating/Searching	39.86	41.68	39.76	.000
24. Overcoming Obstacles	36.47	37.45	35.91	.025
25. Working Hard	39.00	41.11	38.96	.000

[a]$n = 279$. [b]$n = 390$. [c]$n = 67$. [d]A probability of $< .001$ is considered to indicate a difference that is statistically significant.

Table 2
Scales for Which There Was No Statistical Difference Among Samples

Scale	Meaning of lower scores	Meaning of higher score
3. Acceptance of Uncertainty	Clients believe they should have decided by now	Indecision is understandable
4. Openness	Keep private reasons for occupational choices—where to attend school, what career to pursue, what steps to take when working toward goals	Willing to disclose reasons for such choices
5. Achievement	Motivated by goals other than achievement	Highly motivated to achieve
6. College Education	College is necessary for a good job	College is only one of the routes to a good job
8. Peer Equality	Desire to excel others	Need not excel others
10. Control	Career path is influenced by others	Career path is self-determined
13. Self-Other Comparisons	Compare self with others when evaluating the progress and success of their careers	Avoid comparisons with others
17. Job Experimentation	Need a consistent career path	Willing to try alternative occupations
20. Persisting While Uncertain	Need clear goals to work hard uncertainty	Always work hard despite
21. Taking Risks	Better not to try if failure is possible failure	Better to try hard despite possible
22. Learning Job Skills	Dislike job training	Enjoy learning new job skills
24. Overcoming Obstacles	Obstacles are blocking progress	Obstacles can be overcome

achieving and improving their socioeconomic conditions as others. Scale 8, Peer Equality (see Table 2) reinforces this notion, as the vast majority of the VA sample expressed a comparable desire to excel over others within the workplace, rather than to rest complacently in entry-level positions. The majority of homeless veterans similarly expressed an interest in learning new job skills, and they believed that obstacles can be overcome (Scales 22 and 24; see Table 2), undermining the common notion that homeless veterans are unwilling to take active, positive steps to improve their employability.

The significant differences between the VA group and the two norm groups on 10 of the scales (see Tables 3 and 4) may be attributed to the extreme educational disparities between the VA group and the norm groups, the socioeconomic condition of the VA sample, and the frustration encountered in the lives of homeless veterans. For example, the lack of a college education among the VA sample may explain why they are less able to differentiate among different colleges and among different individuals

Table 3
Probabilities Associated With Group Comparisons on the 12 Scales With Differences Among the Groups

Scale	VA group vs. Employed Norm group	VA group vs. Unemployed Norm group	Employed Norm group vs. Unemployed Norm group
2. Career Plans	.006	.008	.000
7. Intrinsic Satisfaction	.000	.017	> .050
9. Structured Work Environment	.000	.002	> .050
11. Responsibility	.000	.000	> .050
12. Approval of Others	.000	.000	> .050
14. Occupation/College Variation	.000	.003	> .050
15. Career Path Flexibility	.000	.000	.021
16. Post-training Transition	.000	.005	> .050
18. Relocation	.000	.000	> .050
19. Improving Self	.000	.024	> .050
23. Negotiating/Searching	.000	> .050	.016
25. Working Hard	.000	> .050	.003

Note. A probability of < .05 is considered to indicate a difference that is statistically significant.

Table 4
Scales for Which There Were Significant Differences Between the VA Group and Each of the Norm Groups

Scale	Meaning of lower scores	Meaning of higher scores
2. Career Plans	Career plans already decided	Career plans are open to change
7. Intrinsic Satisfaction	Work is a means to other goals	Work tasks must be satisfying
9. Structured Work Environment	Prefer flexible hours with no supervision	Prefer standard work hours with supervision
11. Responsibility	Expert help can determine the best career choice	A career choice is a personal choice
12. Approval of Others	Approval is important	Approval does not matter
14. Occupation/College Variation	See similarities among colleges and workers within a given occupation	See differences among colleges and workers within a given occupation
15. Career Path Flexibility	Certain steps must be followed in a proper sequence	Several routes can lead to goal attainment
16. Post-training Transition	The job must be consistent with initial training	The job may differ from initial training
18. Relocation	Would not move for a better job	Willing to move for a better job
19. Improving Self	Satisfied with current performance	Desire to improve performance

within a given occupation (Scale 14; see Table 4). Also, their lower level of education and the poor jobs available to them may explain why homeless veterans do not view work as an intrinsically satisfying activity (Scale 7; see Table 4). The conviction that experts are required to best determine a career choice (Scale 11; see Table 4) and that certain prescribed steps must be followed in any career choice or change (Scale 15; see Table 4) may reflect a lower education level as well as the doctrine and character of self-help recovery programs and therapeutic communities in which these homeless veterans were enrolled at the time of testing. Educational level may also account for the VA sample's relatively high score on Scale 9, which measures a preference for standard work hours with supervision. Homeless veterans' involvement in the military, their primary employment in highly supervised blue-collar jobs, and their current enrollment in highly structured rehabilitation programs may explain their preferences for supervised work with set hours.

Some of the differences between the VA sample and the two norm groups may be accounted for by the former group's involvement in a vocational rehabilitation program. For example, the VA sample had significantly higher scores on Scale 12, which measures the importance of approval by others; Scale 18, which measures willingness to relocate for a better job; and Scale 19, which measures desire to improve one's self (see Table 4). The beliefs expressed by the homeless veterans on these three scales would seemingly enhance their chances of getting a job.

On two of the scales, Scale 23, which measures one's willingness to negotiate work changes, and Scale 25, which measures the belief that effort and success are related, the VA group and the Unemployed Norm group did not differ from each other, but both differed from the Employed Norm group (see Table 5). This suggests that lack of employment is the major factor accounting for the VA sample's relatively low scores here, rather than other factors such as educational level or homelessness per se.

Table 5
Scales for Which the VA Group and the Unemployed Norm Group Did Not Differ and Where Both Differed From the Employed Norm Group

Scale	Meaning of lower scores	Meaning of higher scores
23. Negotiating/Searching	The right job is impossible to find	Would negotiate work changes or seek a new job
25. Working Hard	Success is unrelated to effort	Hard work will bring success

Measuring the relative import of these similarities and differences is an extremely difficult task and one that extends beyond the capacity of the CBI alone. It is possible to conclude, on the one hand, that the similarities greatly outweigh the differences and that social service agencies can abandon the presumption that career beliefs are the only critical factors in the unemployability of homeless persons. From this perspective, this study seems to debunk the popular rallying cry that if the "disenfranchised would just think more like the rest of us, they could get a job and would become productive citizens."

> Some disaffiliation theorists have argued that those who are removed from mainstream affiliations may also be expected to lose contact with—or actively reject—mainstream values, thus becoming normatively isolated, a further barrier to escape. There is clear logic to such an expectation: People's world views reflect their material circumstances. But conversely, if homeless people are not isolated from mainstream society, their values may instead be expected to resemble its values. In fact, tied to mainstream society as they are, most homeless...continue to hold most of the same values. (Rosenthal, 1994, p. 136)

Given the remarkable differences in socioeconomic, educational, and criminal status among the VA sample and the two norm groups, the CBI yielded remarkably congruent responses. The startling demographic differences among the three groups were hardly matched by accompanying differences on the CBI.

However, the similarities on a number of scales among the three samples does not dismiss the possibility that the employability of homeless veterans is hindered by attitudes expressed on some scales. For example, the similarities among all three groups registered on Scale 17, Job Experimentation (see Table 2), might reveal some serious problems for homeless veterans. All three groups shared the belief that a consistent career path is essential. Lack of willingness to try alternative occupations may not present a significant concern for an individual with extensive training in a specialized field (e.g., a physician or an attorney); for many homeless veterans, whose training is often sparse at best, a lack of flexibility and consideration of alternative occupations may pose serious problems with regard to future employability.

The recent increase of jobs requiring minimal supervision and independent work in the rapidly changing national economy suggest a serious need for adaptation among homeless veterans who presented a need for a structured work environment. Their common belief that jobs must be consistent with initial training (Scale 16; see Table 4) may be particularly worrisome. For many homeless veterans, their post-high school training occurred in the military many years ago, and the skills they acquired are outdated or irrelevant in today's civilian work force.

The CBI does not organize a group's vocational attitudes into right and wrong, positive and negative, or healthy and damaging categories. On an aggregate level it may suggest differences among different samples, but it cannot assess the significance or character of these differences. To fully understand the implications of the CBI scores for homeless veterans, further research is necessary on how career beliefs—alongside such factors as education, criminal histories, familial background, macroeconomic trends, national policies, and social developments—manifest themselves in professional conduct and career behavior.

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